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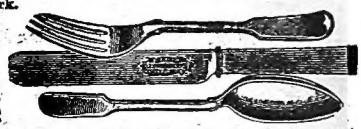

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SHORT STORIES

No. 793.] [ONE PENNY.

For the Week Ending March 12th, 1904.

CARA'S CONSPIRACY.

The Story of its Beginning and End.

Containing the incident depicted on the cover.

"My love—my sweet!"

Passionately Neville Dacre looked down into the darkly-fringed blue eyes, which drooped shyly beneath his ardent glance.

A pair of soft red lips met his in a long, clinging kiss, and for a few moments the lovers were silent, content to rest in that rapturous embrace.

Outside the rain fell heavily on that November day; but the conservatory in which the lovers stood was like a dream of tropical fairyland, wherein a crystal fountain rose and fell softly in its marble basin.

Muriel Vernon gently released herself from Neville's arms and returned the gaze of his dark-grey eyes with a glance of deep love.

How had she contrived to win the affection of this handsome man, the squire of Grangeside village?

Only an hour ago he had come to call nominally upon Mrs. Adair, the old and invalid lady with whom Muriel for some years had lived as companion.

But he had found Muriel alone in the conservatory which opened from the drawing-room at "Grangemount," and Neville Dacre, who had long looked for this opportunity, took the blushing girl in his arms and whispered that he loved her devotedly.

"How can you love the insignificant companion?" asked Muriel, presently, when she and Neville sat side by side on a softly-cushioned couch.

Neville glanced proudly at the lovely face that rested on his shoulder.

"Insignificant!" he repeated fondly. "My darling, I cannot allow you to malign the prettiest girl in Grangeside village!"

He kissed her again passionately on the lips.

"My sweet, I have a little confession to make," said Neville, looking gravely at Muriel, whose face assumed an alarmed expression at this sudden transition of tone. "Don't be afraid, pet. My confession has to deal with money matters."

Muriel's brow relaxed as Neville Dacre uttered those words.

"Only money," she said in a relieved tone. "I thought you were about to tell me something very serious indeed."

Neville Dacre smiled at this contemptuous reference to money matters.

"I must confess the case is rather serious in my eyes, darling," he said, lightly stroking the golden head. "But I will be as brief as possible in my narration."

For the first time Muriel Vernon then heard that Neville Dacre, in addition to his property in Grangeside, owned several coffee plantations in Ceylon.

The bulk of Neville Dacre's income was, indeed, derived from these estates; but by the last mail the young man had learnt that, owing to the systematic defalcations of his managing overseer, his revenues would prove considerably curtailed.

"In fact, my sweet, I shall have to go in person to look after things," concluded Neville gravely. "If not, I stand to lose nearly the whole of my money. I shall be absent most probably for twelve months, and at the end of that time I shall know my prospects one way or another."

Muriel raised her head from her lover's shoulder and sat bolt upright, her hands trembling, and her face blanched at this announcement.

"Neville, Neville, don't leave me!" she faltered brokenly, her blue eyes filling with tears. "I cannot bear you to go away! Never mind money; I don't care how poor you are, as long as you are with me and I have your love."

Her lips quivered as she spoke, and her pleading tones strangely affected Neville Dacre. As he took her in his arms again and whispered endearing terms of love, imploring her to be brave for his sake, the velvet curtains which divided the drawing-room from the conservatory parted in the centre, and a woman's form, erect and imperious, appeared between the opening.

As the newcomer saw Neville Dacre passionately embrace Muriel her whole face changed its expression.

With all the force and passion of her proud nature she loved Neville Dacre, and until this moment had fondly believed her love returned. The unexpected sight of Muriel resting in Neville's arms and Muriel receiving Neville's kisses roused all the fierce torments of jealousy.

As the haughty woman pressed her hand to her throbbing brow a rush of vehement hatred for her successful rival shook her frame, and between her clenched teeth Cara Wyndham vowed vengeance on the girl who had supplanted her.

"After all, Neville, twelve months will soon pass," she heard Muriel say. "I shall be here with Mrs. Adair, and you will write often to me, won't you, darling?"

"Every mail," said Neville fervently. "The time will soon pass, dearest. In twelve months' time I shall come back to claim my wife. Poor or rich, you will be true to me, Muriel, I know?"

From her hiding place Cara Wyndham saw Muriel's form quiver with suppressed sobs.

How long she stood watching the pair she could never tell.

She saw Neville Dacre soothe Muriel into a calmer mood, and heard the two plan out their future life.

"Keep our engagement secret until I return," said Neville, gravely. "As you possess no relations, I suppose you must continue to live here with Mrs. Adair. And, though she is very kind, still she might make some objections to my suit."

Mrs. Adair had fallen into the same error as her niece Cara, and that the companion, Muriel Vernon, pretty and charming

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as she was, should form the great attraction for the young squire, might prove a somewhat disagreeable revelation.

Although possessed of a generous heart, Mrs. Adair was undoubtedly eccentric, and in the first flush of anger Neville Dacre imagined that Muriel might be made to suffer for her mistress' disappointment.

Muriel also was not unconscious of Mrs. Adair's hopes, and felt relieved at Neville's wish to keep the engagement secret.

And then the moment came for the last farewell.

The secret watcher from behind the curtains clenched her hands in deadly anguish and rage to see Neville Dacre rain down kisses on Muriel's white face, and to hear again and again his burning vows of love.

"I leave England to-morrow. In a year's time I shall return to claim you as my wife. Muriel, my heart's darling, be true to me!"

As Cara Wyndham dropped the curtain suddenly and fled to the privacy of her own room Neville's last words echoed again and again on her brain.

"In twelve months' time, Neville Dacre," she cried, "you will return to make Cara Wyndham your wife. I swear you shall never marry Muriel Vernon. I will utterly destroy her happiness. She shall learn what it is to supplant a revengeful woman."

* * * * *

"Sidney, you are in love with Muriel Vernon!"

Six months had elapsed since Neville Dacre had left England, and a new visitor had arrived at "Grangemount."

Sidney Peyton, Mrs. Adair's nephew, suddenly made his appearance one day under his aunt's hospitable roof, and on being introduced to Muriel Vernon had stared at her with such marked admiration that the girl changed colour under his bold glance.

From that day Peyton, whose protracted residence in America had apparently caused a strange deterioration in his manners, openly showed his feelings for Muriel, and only awaited an opportunity to declare his love.

On that hot July evening he and his cousin, Cara Wyndham, had strolled after dinner to the banks of the little stream which flowed peacefully through the grounds.

Cara, dressed in a daffodil silk gown, which suited her dark beauty, stood in the shadow of a giant oak tree and surveyed Peyton with a certain scorn.

"You cannot deny it," she continued, as Peyton puffed moodily at his cigar and made no reply to her charge. "You are in love with Muriel Vernon!"

"I acknowledge it," he said curtly, facing Cara in the moonlight. "She is pretty enough to justify any man worshipping her."

Cara laughed contemptuously and flashed a mocking look at the young man.

"As pretty as she is penniless," she said cuttingly. "I thought you would have looked higher than your aunt's companion, Sidney."

Peyton smiled curiously and flicked some cigar ash from his sleeve.

"If Miss Vernon will have the grace to accept your humble servant," he said slowly, "I shall be the happiest man in England. By Jove, how pretty she looked to-night at dinner in that simple white frock!"

A flush of anger rose to Cara Wynham's face. She threw off the lace hood on her hair and looked at Sidney Peyton with a passionate scorn.

"How can you afford to marry a penniless girl?" she said, contemptuously. "At present your income is scarcely large enough for your own wants. How do you propose to make it answer for two?"

Her cutting tone roused Peyton's anger.

"Don't trouble yourself about my concerns, Cara!" he said, fiercely. "I intend to marry Muriel Vernon, and I will permit no one to interfere with my plans."

An ironical laugh broke from Cara Wyndham's lips.

"Never prophesy until you know," she said, taking a step nearer to the young man in order to watch the effect of her words. "Considering that Muriel Vernon is engaged to another man, I fancy someone is very likely to interfere with your plans."

A deep oath escaped Sidney Peyton. With a sudden movement he gripped Cara's arm and fixed his fierce eyes upon her.

"Engaged?" he repeated furiously. "What is the man's name?"

"Neville Dacre," said Cara, vindictively, resenting her cousin's fierce grip. "He and Muriel have been secretly engaged six months, and when Neville returns from Ceylon they are to be married."

"And how came you to learn the secret?" asked Peyton angrily. "Does Muriel confide all her love affairs to you?"

Cara Wyndham freed herself from her cousin's grasp.

"No," she said, sullenly; "I overheard Neville Dacre confess his love to Muriel."

Peyton threw a quick glance at her stormy countenance.

"You love this man yourself," he said, noting her sudden start. "And in spite of your affected friendship for Muriel Vernon you would give much to break off her engagement to this Dacre. Am I not right, Cara?"

For a moment his companion hesitated.

Peyton watched her lips quiver as if about to open.

And then Cara, with a vehement gesture, turned rapidly from him in the direction of the house.

He followed her quickly and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Come, Cara dear," he said, soothingly, "let us be friends. Perhaps my last question was rather impertinent. But if you will help me to gain Muriel Vernon for my wife I will tell you why I can afford to marry a penniless girl."

"Then there is some hidden motive in your wish to gain Muriel?" asked Cara, eagerly, her face lit up with the prospective joy of ridding herself of her successful rival. "Trust me, Sidney; I will do all I can to help you."

At that very instant it chanced that Muriel Vernon, in obedience to Mrs. Adair's request, came out on the terrace which ran past the drawing-room and searched anxiously for the two guests.

The two watchers withdrew further into the darkness of the trees, and in another moment Muriel had vanished from the terrace.

The sight of her pure beauty had aroused conflicting emotions in Sidney Peyton's breast. He turned to Cara with a harsh laugh.

"We might be the angels of darkness plotting against an angel of light," he said, with a touch of self-scorn in his tone. "Cara, shall we give up our scheme?"

A fallen tree lay in their path. Cara seated herself upon it and motioned Peyton to take his place at her side.

"Waverer!" she said scornfully. "Do you wish to marry this girl?"

Peyton smiled.

"I only wished to try you, Cara," he said, half-flippantly. "When you have heard my story you will see that, though I love Muriel Vernon for her own sweet sake, there are other weighty reasons why I am determined to succeed in my suit."

In low tones, as though afraid the very trees might hear his secret, Sidney Peyton confided his base tale to the woman seated by his side.

With a heart beating with passionate envy Cara Wyndham learnt that, unknown to all save Sidney Peyton, Muriel Vernon was the heiress to forty thousand pounds.

While travelling in America Peyton had come across a middle-aged Englishman named Forster, who was dying in an out-of-the-way district from the result of an accident.

Mr. Forster had been thrown from his horse and fatally injured.

In the presence of Sidney Peyton and the innkeeper the dying man had signed a will, leaving all his money to the niece whose name and abode were mentioned in the document.

Peyton had faithfully promised to see the will duly carried out, and Mr. Forster died happy in the thought that the niece whom he had so shamefully neglected for such a length of time would now be amply endowed for the rest of her life.

The plan of winning Muriel Vernon for his wife before

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acquainting her with the news of her wealth had speedily flashed into Sidney Peyton's mind.

This scheme it was which had induced him to prolong his visit at "Grangemount." The daily sight of Muriel's beauty and sweetness had but added fuel to his passion, and now Peyton, by fair means or foul, was resolved to win Mr. Forster's heiress for his own wife.

The two conspirators sat on the fallen tree, weaving plot after plot to ruin Muriel's happiness.

In Cara Wyndham's heart raged a storm of violent passions. To her other crime of attracting Neville Dacre Muriel had now added the wickedness of inheriting more wealth than Cara Wyndham.

The passionate woman rose from her seat.

"Trust me, Sidney," she said, clenching her hands tightly. "If you will but follow my instructions Muriel Vernon shall be your wife in less than six months."

The following afternoon Cara Wyndham, clad in a gorgeous dress, seated herself at the writing-table in her own sitting-room.

By the open window, dreamily looking out into the sunlit garden, stood Muriel Vernon. Her thoughts were far away in Ceylon, Only that afternoon she had written to Neville Dacre, telling him how daily she awaited his return, and how slowly the time passed by during his long absence.

Suddenly Cara turned round from the table and accosted her.

"By-the-way, Muriel," said Cara, pausing, pen in hand, and fixing her dark eyes on the girl's fair face, "you remember Mr. Neville Dacre, who used to visit here so frequently last summer?"

What a hypocrite Muriel felt as she forced herself to answer calmly: "Yes, Cara, I remember him perfectly well. Why do you ask?"

"Only because Sidney and I were talking about him this morning. I was rather surprised to hear that he was about to be married very shortly to a wealthy girl."

The floor reeled beneath Muriel's feet; she grasped the window ledge to support her trembling limbs.

"Married!" faltered her suddenly parched lips. "How do you know, Cara?"

Miss Wyndham laughed carelessly.

"Oh, Sidney met this girl somewhere, and she told him of her engagement to a Mr. Dacre of Grangeside. So naturally I came to the conclusion that, as there was only one Grangeside in England, the happy bridegroom must be the Neville Dacre we know."

Her cruel eyes gloated over the sight of Muriel's blanched face.

The girl had swallowed the story even better than she had anticipated.

"But, after all, Dacre is not such an uncommon name," faltered Muriel, forcing herself to speak. "I don't believe——"

Cara interrupted her contemptuously.

"My dear Muriel," she said, with an icy stare, "surely because Neville Dacre indulged in a little flirtation with you the fact of his marriage with a wealthy heiress need not excite you quite so much!"

"Cara, how dare you speak to me in that manner?" cried Muriel, suddenly roused to fury by the unexpected taunt. "Neville Dacre never flirted with me. He is my betrothed husband!"

With her blue eyes flashing wrathfully, her slight form drawn up to its full height, Muriel Vernon seemed utterly transformed from the quiet, gentle girl whom Cara knew.

A scornful laugh broke from Cara's lips

The secret watcher saw Neville rain kisses upon Muriel's brow.

"Mr. Dacre the betrothed husband of my aunt's companion?" she said, fixedly staring at Muriel. "How utterly ridiculous!"

"It is true!" cried Muriel passionately. "I am engaged to Neville Dacre, and until I hear from his own lips that he has given me up I will trust him with all my heart."

As she swept proudly to the door Cara Wyndham's sneering tones again reached her ears.

"Perhaps you are unaware that Mr. Dacre has lost his fortune, and that only a marriage with a wealthy girl can save him from ruin. If I were you I should be ashamed to drag a man down to poverty."

Scarcely had she ended her cruel speech before the door closed violently, and Cara Wyndham found herself alone.

Down the passage Muriel hastened to her own room. Her eyes were blinded with scalding tears and her bosom heaved tumultuously.

Her letter to Neville lay on her dressing-table. She took it up with trembling hands. Should she let the missive go, she asked herself, with all its words of love?

"No," cried Muriel passionately; "Cara is right! I will never drag a man down to ruin. This very afternoon Neville shall be released from his engagement."

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She dried her eyes impatiently and took out a sheet of fresh notepaper.

Fired with her sense of wrong, Muriel Vernon wrote swiftly the words which surged into her brain:

"*I give you back your freedom. From this moment all is at an end between us. I no longer love you.*

"Muriel Vernon."

Hastily she inclosed the few lines in an envelope, and directed it to Neville Dacre.

Then, in fear lest her resolution might fail, she rang the bell for the maid, and asked that her letter might be sent at once to the post.

As the maid left the room Muriel's face lost its look of fixed determination.

Her lips quivered brokenly, and with a low moan she threw herself on the bed, weeping as though her heart would break with sorrow.

Little did she guess that at the same moment Cara Wyndham was bending triumphantly over her writing-table, inditing a note to Neville Dacre on the pretence of requiring information about the climate of Ceylon.

"The sting shall lie in the tail," cried the treacherous woman, looking up as she hastily scrawled the following postcript:

"*By-the-way, we hope to have a wedding very shortly at 'Grangemount.' My cousin, Mr. Sidney Peyton, who has recently come into a large fortune, is engaged to my aunt's companion, Miss Vernon. I wonder if you remember her. She and Sidney are passionately in love with one another, and I am sure you will acknowledge that Miss Vernon will make a pretty bride.*"

"There!" murmured Cara Wyndham scornfully, stamping the letter with the seal that hung on her chain, "I think Mr Neville Dacre will be rather surprised to read that Miss Muriel has jilted him for a richer man."

* * * * *

Far away in Ceylon Neville Dacre lay tossing on his bed, delirious with fever. Every now and again his hand plucked restlessly at the coverlet, and a cry of "Muriel! Muriel!" broke from his parched lips.

The fateful letter had accomplished more than Cara Wyndham had wished. On the memorable day when the English mail had arrived Neville Dacre had hastened home in the expectation of finding a letter from his beloved Muriel awaiting him.

Since his residence in Ceylon affairs had gone ill with him. The defalcations were even more serious than at first apprehended, and Neville Dacre, in his anxiety to return to England as soon as possible, threw himself into the difficult task of overhauling his business with more zeal than wisdom. Worried and overworked, his constitution became enfeebled by the climate, and, unknown to himself, the fever already burnt in his veins.

With a strange feeling of giddiness he tore open the letter directed in Cara Wyndham's handwriting, reserving Muriel's epistle to the last.

"Muriel engaged to Sidney Peyton!" he said, mechanically, aloud, as though repeating a lesson. "Miss Wyndham is jesting. Of course she doesn't know Muriel is my promised wife."

Conscious that his brain was beginning to reel still more, Neville seized Muriel's letter and ran his eye quickly over the contents.

For a moment he stood rooted to the spot, unable to understand the full import of the words. He passed his hand over his brow in a vacant, helpless manner.

"I no longer love you—free—all at an end!" said Neville Dacre stupidly. "What does it mean?"

Then, like a lightning flash, the terrible truth burst upon him.

Muriel was false to him—Muriel, whom he had loved so greatly! No, no, it could not be true! And yet the words were in her own handwriting.

Could it be that she had preferred wealth with another man to Neville and comparative poverty? This Peyton was rich and——

His distracted thoughts proceeded no further.

With a cry of anguish Neville Dacre staggered backwards and fell senseless on the floor.

In this condition he was found by his servant, and was carried off to bed, where for many weeks he lay prostrate and unconscious with a raging fever.

In the meantime, at "Grangemount," Muriel Vernon grew daily more wretched with her own thoughts, and under the pressure of Sidney Peyton's attentions. The young man seemed never absent from her side.

One bright morning in September the three were seated at breakfast. Muriel's cheeks were thin and pale, and the dark rings beneath her eyes told of inward trouble and unhappiness.

Despite her letter releasing Neville from his engagement, the girl had hoped against hope that the next mail would bring her word from her lover, rebuking her for her words, and telling her of his faithful love.

But already two mails had come in, and no letter had reached her bearing the welcome postmark.

Silently the unhappy girl sat over her breakfast, her eyes bent on the white cloth, while Sidney Peyton took up the daily paper, and affected to be immersed in its contents.

"Come, Sidney," said Cara Wyndham, briskly, "pray tell me some news. Is there no one married or dead whom we know?"

Peyton's hand trembled slightly as he rustled the newspaper, and feigned to search anxiously down the columns.

"Alice Graham married!" he exclaimed suddenly, in an excited tone.

"Isn't that the great heiress you told me about?" asked Cara Wyndham, noting Muriel's change of colour. "Who is the lucky bridegroom, Sidney?"

Peyton affected to look again at the announcement.

The words that sounded on Muriel Vernon's ear were: "On the 12th instant, Alice, daughter of the late Charles Graham, to Neville Dacre, formerly of Grangeside, England."

"Neville Dacre!" exclaimed Cara, in a tone of affected surprise. "So he is married at last! You told me you thought Miss Graham was engaged to him."

"So I heard," said Peyton, coolly, looking at Muriel's suddenly blanched face with savage joy. "Someone told me she had met this Dacre, and he had fallen head over ears in love with her. And as she was almost a millionairess, I suppose she could afford to marry anyone she liked."

Whiter and whiter had grown Muriel's face.

At any cost she must leave the room and flee from those prying eyes of Peyton's, which seemed to guess her secret.

"Excuse me, Cara," she gasped forth, with a piteous smile. "My—my head aches; I will go to my room."

Her voice quivered brokenly.

She rose from her chair, and, with shaking limbs, tottered from the room. Half fainting, and grasping at the wall for support, she contrived to reach her own chamber.

Uttering a heart-broken cry, she threw herself down on the bed.

Neville was married! Then after all he had proved false! He had forgotten her, and this heiress was now his wife!

"My heart is broken!" moaned the wretched girl.

Downstairs, in full triumph at the success of their stratagem, the two conspirators looked at one another with congratulatory smiles.

"That was a splendid idea to insert this fictitious marriage announcement," said Cara, laughingly. "Muriel will doubtless be weeping her heart out at Neville's perfidy. It will be your task to console her, Sidney."

Peyton smiled vindictively.

"I shall do my best, Cara," he said. "I must persuade Muriel to marry me as soon as possible. It would be very awkward for me if the other witness to the will suddenly took it into his head to inquire if Mr. Forster's directions had been carried out."

The weeks flew by, bringing the fallen leaves of autumn in their train. Muriel Vernon, pale and thin, went about the

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house trying her utmost to forget her absorbing sorrow. Mrs. Adair daily grew weaker and weaker, and relied more and more upon Muriel's devoted ministrations. Cara Wyndham and Peyton appeared to have taken up their permanent abode at "Grangemount."

"Muriel is in the conservatory," said Cara, one cold afternoon in December, when Peyton had come in from a long walk. "Go and talk to her now. Perhaps she will listen more favourably to you."

Cara was seated in the drawing-room. He was about to answer her when the maid entered the room.

"Mr. Neville Dacre," she said, quietly, unconscious of the shock of her announcement. "He is in the library, Miss Wyndham, and wishes to see you immediately."

Both Cara and Peyton had drawn a deep breath of agitation. As the maid left the room the two looked at one another in terrible dismay.

"The game is up!" said Peyton, hurriedly. "He will see Muriel, and find the truth out for himself."

"No, no!" said Cara, in an agitated whisper. "I have a good plan, Sidney."

She came nearer to him, and laid her hand on his sleeve.

"Listen!" she resumed, with blazing eyes. "Neville Dacre will ask if Muriel is yet married. I shall answer 'Yes.' And to prove my words I will bring him into this room. You must go into the conservatory, and contrive that Muriel shall stand with her back to the drawing-room. I will draw the curtains away from the glass door, and, when you hear me cough slightly, seize Muriel in your arms and kiss her passionately. Neville Dacre will then believe my words."

"The game is dangerous," said Peyton, hoarsely; "but I will do anything to keep this man from making his appearance."

Cara glided into the library, her heart beating fast with excitement. At her entrance Neville Dacre confronted her, a stern, set look on his pale face.

"Miss Wyndham," he said, quickly, after the first conventional greetings were over, "I have risen from a sick bed, determined to hear with my own ears that Miss Vernon has been false to me. You were ignorant that, before I left England, she and I were engaged. I cannot believe Muriel is capable of jilting me. Tell me that it is not true!"

His voice faltered, and he looked intreatingly at Cara. Her eyes met his with a sorrowful glance, as though grieved to see his suffering.

"How could Muriel behave in that callous manner?" she cried, reproachfully. "Alas! I regret to say she is already Sidney Peyton's wife. If you will come with me to the drawing-room, you will see for yourself whether Muriel has not forgotten you."

Quickly she led the way to the drawing-room, and with a noiseless footstep drew aside the fold of the velvet curtain. As one in a dream, Neville had followed her, and now stood at her side.

"Look!" exclaimed Cara softly, as she gave a slight, warning cough. "There is Muriel, in her husband's arms!"

Yes, it was true. With his own eyes Neville Dacre beheld the girl he loved lying in Peyton's arms and receiving his kisses on her lips. The sight was too sickening. With a groan he dropped the curtain, and forgetting even to say farewell to Cara Wyndham, he rushed from the house, convinced by his own eyesight that Muriel Vernon was the heartless, mercenary woman he had hitherto refused to believe.

"From henceforward you deal with a man who has overheard all your base conspiracy!" cried Neville.

* * *

"Muriel, how do you like my gown?" asked Cara.

In the luxuriously furnished bedroom of her London house Cara Wyndham stood before a splendid mirror, arrayed for a fashionable reception. A magnificent gold brocade robed her beautiful figure and enhanced the rich tones of her wonderful complexion.

A slight girlish form, dressed in mourning, rose from an armchair and stood beside the heiress.

"Cara, you look superb," said Muriel Vernon, whose pale, sweet face wore a pathetic expression in its large, deep violet eyes.

"You will create a sensation at Lady Temple's."

The diamond tiara in Cara's dark hair flashed brilliantly as the heiress walked slowly along the bedroom, illuminated with the soft light of innumerable wax candles.

"I am glad you think my dress becoming," said Cara, fastening a diamond necklace round her throat. "To-night, Muriel, I want to look my very best."

"Good-night, Cara," said Muriel, with a depressed, tired feeling at her heart. "I hope you will enjoy your evening as much as you wish."

"Sidney Peyton is to be present as well," said Cara, coming across to Muriel and looking down into the girl's violet eyes. "Muriel, when do you intend to reward his devotion?"

"Never!" answered the girl, meeting Cara's glance firmly. "I do not intend to marry anyone, Cara."

Before Cara could answer, Muriel had left the room, and had taken her way downstairs into the street.

That lovely evening in April her thoughts were very bitter. A week after Peyton had insulted her in the conservatory, an

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insult for which he had apologised contritely, Mrs. Adair had died suddenly.

In remembrance of Muriel's devoted services a small annuity was left to her. The girl had come up to London, hoping to obtain some employment, and for the last four months had eked out her annuity by giving music lessons. Of Neville Dacre she had heard nothing further. His house in Grangeside was shut up, and when Muriel left the village it was with the thought that her former lover was still resident with his wife in Ceylon.

Cara Wyndham and Peyton had also come up to London. The former had taken up her residence in town for the season, and Peyton proved a frequent visitor.

The young man grew daily more and more bitter at his non-success with Muriel.

Time after time he met the girl at his cousin's magnificently appointed house; but Muriel still refused to listen to his protestations of love. Little did she dream that Neville Dacre was also in town, and that his name was coupled together by gossips with Cara Wyndham's.

A changed man was Neville Dacre in those last few months. Moody and cynical, he had met Cara Wyndham in town, and in a spirit of recklessness, had plunged into a desperate flirtation with her. Muriel had played him false on account of his poverty, he thought bitterly. Why should he not marry for money, then?

Peyton, of course, kept in the background when Neville made his appearance, and, owing to Cara's skilful management, the two men had never met.

At eleven o'clock that evening Lady Temple's superb mansion was thronged with a brilliant crowd, among whom Cara Wyndham moved restlessly along in the society of her cousin. As yet Neville Dacre had not appeared, and a look of angry disappointment began to creep over Cara's features.

She and Sidney Peyton were sitting together in a dimly-lit alcove, which was divided from an iron balcony by a large screen. Save for the two people the room was deserted.

"Sidney," said Cara suddenly, "I am ashamed of you! Have I not kept up a pretence of friendship all these months with Muriel Vernon simply that you might have an opportunity of meeting her at my house? How is it you have not succeeded in winning her yet?"

Her taunt aroused Peyton's anger. He leant forward, and spoke in a sneering tone.

"Why have you not succeeded in marrying Neville Dacre? Your grand idea in writing that letter hasn't quite accomplished its end. Muriel still loves that man. Suppose I tell Neville Dacre that his old sweetheart lives in London, and is still unmarried? I don't think he would be long before he found himself at No. 14 Pembroke Crescent. What would you say, Cara, if I sent him that address?"

His jeering words filled Cara with a new-born fury. Passionately she answered back, unconscious that Peyton's last words had been overheard by a man who had sauntered idly on to the balcony from the adjoining room.

As Miss Wyndham's angry tones sounded from behind the screen the listener drew nearer and nearer to the pair. His face wore a strange expression; his eyes gleamed with anger as Peyton, in bitter recrimination, recounted savagely the difficulty he had met with in keeping secret the fact of Muriel's inheritance.

"But she shall never know," ended Peyton, sneeringly, "unless she consents to be my wife!"

Suddenly from behind the screen a man's form emerged. Cara Wyndham started violently, and gazed, terrified, at the newcomer. It was Neville Dacre himself!

"This time, Mr. Peyton, you have reckoned without your host!" said Neville, in a cold, stern voice. "From henceforth you deal with a man who has overheard all your base conspiracy! Unless you give up Mr. Forster's will by to-morrow I will place the affair in the hands of the law!"

As he strode fiercely from the room Cara Wyndham sank, half fainting, on the chair. The man for whose love she had plotted and schemed now looked upon her with unutterable loathing and contempt.

Her plots were discovered, and in Neville Dacre's eyes she was for ever outcast and despised.

"Take me away, Sidney!" she gasped, looking up at Peyton with a ghastly expression on her face. "I cannot breathe!"

* * * * * * *

At ten o'clock the next morning Muriel, seated in her quiet, dingy room, heard a thundering knock at the front door.

In another moment a tall, manly form had burst into the room, and ere Muriel could speak Neville Dacre had clasped her to his heart.

"My love! My sweet!" he cried, passionately, raining down kisses on her pale face. "I have come back at last! Darling, say you love me as much as ever!"

"Neville, Neville, you have no right to ask me!" gasped Muriel, trying vainly to release herself from those strong arms. "Where is your wife?"

Neville laughed gleefully.

"Here," he said, pressing a long kiss on her soft mouth. "Muriel, sweetheart, I have much to tell you."

Leading her to a couch, he sat down by her side, and unfolded Cara Wyndham's conspiracy.

"False, malicious woman!" he cried, in anger. "She would have robbed me of my true love, and you of your just inheritance."

Muriel looked up at him with a deep tenderness in her glorious eyes.

"Dear love," she whispered, winding her arms round his neck, "we can afford to forgive her now. Out of our great happiness, dearest, let us give some pity to one who has so deeply sinned."

A great wave of love swept through Neville's heart as the sweet intercessor smiled pleadingly into his face.

"My beloved," he said, gently stroking the golden head which lay against his shoulder, "it shall be as you wish. When Cara Wyndham sues for pardon she shall learn the goodness of the most forgiving soul the world has ever contained!"

* * * * * * *

A year after a broken-down woman crept to Grangeside, and asked humbly for an interview with Mrs. Neville Dacre.

Lovelier and more radiant than ever, Muriel came into the room, and found Cara Wyndham standing by the mantelpiece.

Haggard and worn, she was changed almost beyond recognition, and the sombre black dress she wore accentuated the pallor of her face.

"Muriel," she said, feebly, as the girl came to her with outstretched hands, "I have come to ask forgiveness for all the evil I worked. Six months ago I married Sidney Peyton. My punishment was just. He has gambled away every penny of my fortune, and has now deserted me. Before I leave the country I wish to ask your pardon."

Muriel's sweet eyes looked into those of the penitent woman.

"Fully and freely I forgive you," she said, gently, taking Cara's hand. "My own happiness is too great for words, and if for the moment you darkened my life, I learnt the great lesson that the furnace of affliction only tests and strengthens the value of true, faithful love!"

Harold Prior.

Lady (engaging a footman): "Are you clever at the table?" James: "Yes, mum." Lady: "And you know your way to announce?" James: "Well, mum, I know my weight to a pound or so, but I should hardly like to say to an ounce."

"I want your daughter and a modest dowry to boot," said young Green to old Keener. "Well, I've wanted something to boot for a long time," said the old man, "and I think you'll do very nicely." The defeated suitor disappeared like a lightning flash.

"May I have the pleasure of seeing you home?" he bashfully asked. "Certainly," she graciously replied. "There is a high hill just in front of the house, or, if you prefer it, you can climb a big tree in the field. Go anywhere so that you can get a good view."

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The Handsome Neighbour.

The Story of an Unjust Suspicion.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come, Maurice!" said pretty little Emma. "If *you* can't discover what is the matter with Howard, his case is hopeless."

Handsome Maurice Aubray was the very man for an emergency, and had come to his brother's post-haste, summoned by Howard's distressed wife.

"I have just shaken hands with both Howard and your sister," said Maurice. "He looks peevish; but that is nothing new. I suppose you have not indicated the object of my sudden coming?"

"Not a syllable. Marian simply consulted with me as to what would be best. She fears he is losing his mind."

Maurice laughed a little.

"It's rather depressing here. Don't you find it dull?"

Emma blushed, and glanced along the grass, unaccountably disconcerted.

"I—I don't know. I like the country."

"This *is* the country, with a vengeance! I dare say you have no society at all. Who lives in the house next door?" asked Maurice, scanning the pretty Gothic building through his eyeglass. "A brick wall to divide the two gardens! How odd! Not an asylum, or that sort of thing, is it?"

"Oh, no," replied the young lady. "A young man lives there—a hermit."

"A hermit! Handsome, of course?"

"Oh, very handsome. He is a student, and writes."

"I see—another Tennyson?"

Just then there was a tap on the window-pane. Maurice entered the house quickly. He was met by his sister-in-law—a beautiful woman, whose face was pale and careworn.

"Maurice, your brother is ready to receive you now," she said. "I hope you will be able to clear away this terrible cloud that hangs over us. I have sent for you as a last step."

"I shall do what I can, of course; but are you sure you don't exaggerate matters a little?"

"Not the least. I begin to grow satisfied he is mad. He remains moody and sullen in his room all the time—seldom speaks to me—when a servant knocks at the door he gives way to a burst of fury—all night he paces the floor—are not these things the signs of insanity?"

"Of insanity, or dyspepsia. And can you not imagine whether there is a secret foundation——"

"None—none! I assure you there is not the shadow of a cause. We live like hermits, and under almost no expense. For several years Howard has not spent half his income."

Maurice frowned, and shook his big head

"Puzzling—puzzling," he said. "Well, depend upon me to do my best."

Howard Aubray was in his study. Slender, pale, and dark, he looked the picture of an invalid; and this effect was heightened by another fact—he was crippled. He sat in his chair, silent, gloomy, and suffering; his cheek resting upon his hand. At the entrance of Maurice, he did not rise, but peevishly offered his hand.

"I am glad to see you, Maurice," he said; "though you probably don't think so. Sit down—tumble those books off that armchair. What on earth has brought you to this forlorn place?"

"Wanted a change of air and scene," answered Maurice briskly. "My old rule, you know—bird of passage."

"You always were an active spirit, it is true; and I, passive as a stone monument. Don't you think I look like the fiend himself?"—and he cast a sour sneer at the cornice.

"You don't look well, I admit, and I know very well there is something at the bottom of it."

"There *is!*" said the invalid, clenching his fingers with sudden fury. "I am the most miserable dog alive, and I couldn't hide it if I would. It is strange I have not blown my brains out long ago."

"Well, what's the trouble? Some nonsense, I dare say."

"Yes; very foolish," said Howard Aubray, with a short laugh. "Amusing enough to others not in the same fix."

"Owe money?"

"I owe vengeance—a debt that is accumulating from hour to hour, from minute to minute, at compound interest!" he cried, rising and limping about the floor. "I have discovered that my wife is in love with my handsome neighbour! Too absurd, isn't it, to treat seriously? Such an old story, you know; but it ends tragically sometimes!"

"What *do* you mean?"

"You, perhaps, noticed the pretty house next door? A very good-looking and very fascinating young man lives there—Mr. Ashley Travers. He is not a sulky cripple like me, and the lady who passes for my wife has been discerning enough to see the difference."

Maurice heard this with alarm and pain. Of all the conjectures he had made regarding the cause of his brother's conduct, the miserable truth that he was on the rack of jealousy had never entered his mind.

"You cannot be serious," he said.

"Perhaps you will learn better soon. I am waiting, and on the watch; the drama draws to a close."

"We never had anything from each other in the old days, Howard," said Maurice, kindly. "Many a scrape we were in together, and many the licking we shared, eh? Do you remember the time we took away the eggs from old Willock's hen and put goose, turkey, and duck, and all sorts of other eggs under her? And have you forgotten old Willock's fright when his old hen came marching out of her nest one morning with almost every feathered thing in creation among her

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brood, instead of the expected Brahmas? And don't you recollect the unmerciful trimming we caught at home? My bones ache yet!"

Maurice was laughing uproariously over these reminiscences, and his mirth was contagious, for his brother laughed too, long and heartily—evidently for the first time in many months.

"Why, then, can't you trust me as fully now as you did in those times, Howard?" continued Maurice, following up his advantage. "I hope I am as true, and certainly there is no doubt I am much less giddy. I have learnt a thing or two in all these years."

"You always were shrewd and clever, Maurice, and perhaps I had better be frank with you after all. You know what a life I am forced to lead, and Marian has been forced to share it. She has not had my resignation; her love has been a woman's love—ardent enough to begin with, but cooling with time and trial. Her fidelity has changed from that pretty sentiment we read of in poetry to that other sort we too often experience—the fidelity of a slave who clings to you because he can't get away."

"This is unjust—most cruel! You wrong her; she never loved you more devotedly, Howard."

"She has been holding conference with you, I see," said Howard, with a dark, peevish smile. "What she has *said* will weigh nothing against what I have *seen*. Last night I was standing at the window at the top of the staircase. All kinds of idle fancies were in my mind. Suddenly I looked down into the garden, and—I suppose you noticed the brick wall which divides it from that next door?—two persons stood there—my wife, in her white hood, was one, lingering on this side of the wall and leaning over. On the other side stood my handsome neighbour, Mr. Ashley Travers. I watched them with a good deal of interest. It was a situation suggestive of that in Millais' picture. Presently Mr. Travers leant over and kissed my wife, she waved her hand, and they separated. These things I *saw*, remember."

Maurice looked very grave and disturbed. "But you have been troubled for weeks, they tell me."

"With good reason; about a month ago I found a love-letter, in my wife's handwriting, which first gave rise to my suspicions."

"Indeed!"

"Judge of this for yourself."

He handed his brother a note in Marian's well-known penmanship, and these were the contents:

"My Own Ashley,—*You are too imprudent; sometimes I believe we are observed. Patience, and all may yet be well. In any event, do not doubt my love and faith.*"

"I don't know what to think," said Maurice, as he handed the note back. "I thought Marian the purest and best of women. My advice is, to go to her at once and demand an explanation."

Howard Aubray laughed bitterly.

"She could explain it, of course—what woman could not? You don't know the cunning of the sex, my good brother. She would give me such a plausible explanation that I should rather doubt my own senses than not accept it. No! You know what I mean to do?"

"You must not act rashly. Come, let us take a good long drive together, and have the benefit of the fresh air. I am ready to act with you in anything that concerns your honour; but sometimes there are things done which cannot be undone."

Howard Aubray did not care to go; but his brother insisted. They rode far away together, discussing but the one wretched subject; and night had fallen as they returned. The horse and vehicle were given to the groom at the gate, and the two brothers walked towards the house on foot.

The moon was just visible through the trees. Everything round about was cut white and sharp in its brilliant light.

So pleasant was the scene that, for the moment, Howard, also, forgot everything in contemplation. There was not a chord in his nature unmoved. The air, stirred very lightly by the breeze, was full of that peculiar fragrance which belongs to a summer evening in the country. Bright as the moon was, its splendour did not dim a single constellation, and overhead the heavens glittered with the stars that had mustered there.

"Intoxicating!" murmured Howard.

They went on, passing the garden gate, the latch tinkling softly; and then quietly across the deep grass. The fire-flies were darting about, and from the distance came the deep-mouthed bay of a watch-dog.

Suddenly Howard paused.

"Look!" he said, his eyeballs fierce and round in the moonlight, and his face pale as death.

By the brick wall on this side stood a woman with a white hood on her head. It was Marian.

On the other side stood a young man, tall and dark. He held her hand, and her arm shone white as ivory under the golden shimmer that fell streaming from the stars.

Suddenly he leant over and kissed her.

With a horrid oath of fury and despair, Howard Aubray took something from his breast and held it before him. There was a flash and a report, and then a scream. The figure reeled and fell.

Maurice ran towards her instantly, and, falling on his knee, raised her up. It was not Marian—but poor little Emma!

* * * * *

Happily the wound was not serious, or the result of a hypochondriac's diseased imagination might have wrought a more costly cure than followed as soon as he had discovered the truth. That his pretty sister-in-law should, in the absence of other occupation, fall deeply in love with a handsome neighbour, was the most natural event in the world. That, knowing Howard's prejudice, she should conceal her passion, was no more strange. But at first it seemed odd that she should wear Marian's hood, though that also was presently explained when it appeared that the article was particularly bewitching to Mr. Ashley Travers' senses, and the young lady had none of her own. There remained only one dark doubt—the love-letter.

"Well," said Emma, defiantly, "everybody can't write a good hand. I never could. Marian was always clever with her pen, and I don't think it was any more than sisterly service to come to my assistance."

"Nor was it," said Howard, kissing his wife.

Walter Edgar McCann.

To Those About to Marry.

Don't let the knot be tied without knowing something about the character and disposition of each other. This you can find out by sending a specimen of your handwriting, together with six penny stamps and a stamped addressed envelope, to Ranee, 23 Pearson's Buildings, Henrietta Street, London, W.C. In return an accurate delineation of your character will be sent. If you both obtain these delineations, and then compare them, you will be able to decide whether a happy marriage is likely to result.

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Exciting Series.

DECOYED!

A Striking Series of Astonishing Revelations.

Told by the Decoy Herself.

OF WHOM YOU READ.

Vivienne D'Alton, the decoy. She, an innocent girl, unwittingly leads young gentlemen of good social standing to their ruin at the hands of the man she believes to be her father.

Beverley D'Alton, who poses as a millionaire who has made his money by judicious speculation. He assumes to lavish great affection on Vivienne.

Mrs. Sherwood. A florid person, who is introduced to Vivienne by her father as a great friend of her dead mother. She lives with the D'Altons, and requests Vivienne to call her "Aunt Flora," which the young girl reluctantly does.

Annchen. A lady's maid, whom Vivienne greatly detests She seems to be on very familiar terms with Mrs Sherwood and Mr. D'Alton.

TENTH EPISODE.

Under Hypnotic Influence!

On the instant all my old doubts and fears made themselves felt; and, hurriedly stepping forward, I put a detaining hand on the poor dazed creature's arm.

"Miss D'Alton," I murmured eagerly, "do you remember me?"

A little cry of joy answered me, followed by broken words of sorrow. "I do not know. I remember nothing! Oh, why has this terrible affliction befallen me?"

"Come, none of that," said the "Bird of Evil Omen." "Policeman, just move this crowd, till I get my aunt into a cab."

"Do nothing of the sort," I enjoined. "This lady is Miss D'Alton, my great-aunt. That man is a scoundrel, who is an entire stranger to her, and I shall hold you responsible if you let her fall into his clutches."

"But what am I to do, miss? I can't keep her here."

"No. Send that man away. Then I will tell you what to do with Miss D'Alton."

The "Bird of Evil Omen" protested against being baulked of his prey. But my dress, my carriage, my servants, and my evident wealth, carried weight, and the fellow was hustled to the outside of the crowd, where he could hear nothing.

"Here are three sovereigns," I whispered to the policeman. "If you will take Miss D'Alton where she will be absolutely safe from enemies, and will see that she is kindly looked after until I fetch her myself, you shall have ten pounds more, But, mind. don't let her out of your care to anyone but myself. I shall not send for her, nor write for her. I will come myself and will perhaps bring a doctor. You understand?"

The policeman did understand, and said so. Then he added in a low voice: "Perhaps I'd better not say where I'll take the lady. But you can find out if you will inquire for P.C. 941 at Marlborough Street Police Station."

Satisfied that the policeman was discreet, I handed him my card, and then turned to Miss D'Alton.

"If you will go with this constable, and wait till I come to you, all will be well. But please do as he tells you."

Although Miss D'Alton's memory was gone, she was sane enough to understand that I was her friend, and readily promised obedience. Then I saw her driven off in a hansom, and, forgetting all about the nerve tonic, I re-entered the carriage and gave the order to drive home.

Dr. Farnie said that I was subject to malignant delusions. But surely this could not be a delusion? Yet where did the connection between the "Bird of Evil Omen" and Miss D'Alton come in? Was it possible that somebody had been playing tricks with the old lady's memory? And was that why she never came back to dine with me as she had promised?

If she fell into evil hands soon after she visited me, that would account for her continued absence. And—sinister thought!—if she was merely an impostor, as my father and Mrs. Sherwood had told me, who could have an interest in depriving her of the faculty of memory? If, on the other hand, she was not an impostor, what else could I think but that she was being deliberately kept out of the way by—no, I daren't say the names even to myself!

Some curious feeling on the subject must, however, have possessed me when I refrained from taking the old lady home with me, and, still more strange, in spite of what had been told me against her, I no longer doubted in my own mind that she was really my father's aunt.

And the "Bird of Evil Omen." How many times had I seen him? Once this afternoon, when he was trying to decoy Miss D'Alton. Once at Knightsbridge, when he was about to assassinate Viscount Broomville. Once on board the boat in which we crossed over from Rotterdam. And once outside Rotterdam, on the night Mr. Graysworthy was murdered.

"Mr. Graysworthy! Why, he also had dealings with my father, and——"

It was a mercy that the carriage stopped opposite our own

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house, for my thoughts were swirling towards madness again, and it was almost a wreck of a girl who walked slowly indoors.

Within the entrance hall the fountain was playing. It was now dusk, and the wonderful arrangement of palms and electric lights, which converted the place into a veritable fairyland, was being fully appreciated by Dr. Farnie. He was sitting in an American rocking-chair, but he rose to his feet to meet me when he saw me enter.

"H'm!" he said, looking critically at my pale face. "I'm afraid your outing has not done you much good. You had better let me give you a dose of the tonic at once."

"The tonic?" I faltered. "Why, I forgot to ask for it."

"You forgot to ask for it? Then you have been enjoying yourself so much that you forgot your ailments?"

The doctor, as was quite natural, hardly looked pleased at my admission, but I hastened to soothe his wounded professional pride by saying: "No, doctor, that isn't it. I really tried at one or two shops, and then something happened which put self out of my head altogether."

"Won't you sit down here and tell me all about it?"

I had only about enough time to be dressed for dinner, and I knew that my father liked me to be punctual. But the doctor's manner and voice were infectiously soothing, and, with a sigh of relief, with which all my worries seemed to take flight, I sank into the chair he had just vacated. Then I told him what had happened while I was out. Still, notwithstanding the fact that I had once more relegated my wild suspicions to the realms of nightmare, I instinctively resisted the strong impulse to be quite frankly confidential, and my story had several important reservations.

For instance, I did not betray the fact that I had seen the "Bird of Evil Omen," otherwise Kaspar, at any time before this evening, and I spoke of him as a loafer who apparently wanted an opportunity of robbing the unfortunate old lady who had lost her memory.

"She came here once and claimed to be my father's aunt," I added. "But both he and Aunt Flora assured me that she was nothing of the sort. Still, that was no reason why I should leave her at the mercy of a street hooligan, so I gave the policeman some money, and told him to take her to a place of safety."

"Yes?"

Dr. Farnie was listening with an air of intense eagerness, which gave place to apparent chagrin when I answered: "That is all."

"But you must know where the old lady was taken to?"

"Indeed I do not. I left it to the policeman's judgment. Perhaps he has taken her to the workhouse infirmary."

I was firmly convinced that the answer I gave was both necessary and wise. But I was possessed by a most extraordinary feeling, which seemed to command me to be confidential against my own better judgment, and it was only by dint of determined mental resistance that I was able to be discreet.

In the light of after events I know exactly what was the matter with me. The doctor was a hypnotist, and he was trying his power upon me. To some extent he was successful. But I still retained the ability to resist his influence in part, and that accounts for the fact that he was not altogether successful in compelling my confidence.

Nevertheless, he again managed to impress upon me the idea that certain terrible doubts of mine were nothing but chimerical fancies, and when I subsequently met my father and Aunt Flora at dinner, I felt as amiably disposed towards them as I did when I went out to buy the "nerve tonic."

Both were in the best of spirits, and both inquired kindly after my health, but not with ostentatious solicitude, for we had several guests to dinner, and they naturally kept every anxiety in the background.

"This is a most delightful meeting, Miss D'Alton," murmured a stout, middle-aged gentleman who sat next to me at the dinner table, and whom I recognised as Prince Alexander Gorouki, a wealthy Russian whom I had met a few times. "I have dreamt of some such blissful moment as this ever since—since—ever since we parted, two days ago."

I glanced up at the speaker in mild astonishment, for he did not look like the kind of person to be airing "Love's young dream." But his gaze was as ardent as his words, and, though I could not help feeling flattered at having charmed so exalted a personage as a prince, I blushed with confusion at the open manner in which he showed his admiration.

Nor was my embarrassment lessened when I glanced across the table and saw Lord Balder scowling fiercely at His Highness, and my relief was great, in more senses than one, when a telegram from Sophie Melrose was handed to me.

"*Arrived Edinburgh—all well,*" she wired. "*Letter to follow.*"

This telegram showed another of my doubts to have been unfounded, and I should have enjoyed the rest of the evening all right if the impetuous wooing of Prince Gorouki had not been so practically supported by my father.

In the drawing-room the Prince never left my side, and he actually contrived an opportunity to ask me to marry him. It was on my lips to say "No." For, though my girlish vanity was undoubtedly flattered, I knew I could never care for this hopelessly plain-looking man. But, strange to say my will seemed suddenly to lose control of my words. Then, as I murmured something which the Prince interpreted as "Yes," I looked up and saw Dr. Farnie's piercing eyes gazing straight at me.

What followed seems like a dream. The Prince gleefully announced my acceptance there and then. My father gave me a paternal kiss, and spoke a mixed sort of speech, in which he alternately lamented the prospective loss of his only child, and gloated over his ability to give her a dowry worthy of the rank which was to be hers.

Lord Balder had taken a hurried departure. But Aunt Flora and the doctor were profuse in their congratulations, and I went to bed that night, knowing that I had promised to marry a man I did not like, but that my will was so held captive that there seemed to be no way of escape for me.

* * * * *

When Susan came to attend to me the next morning, her face was wreathed in smiles, and she handed a tiny package to me, with the words:

"From His Highness the Prince. His man brought it just now."

I had spent a sleepless night, not in dwelling upon my coming grandeur, but in wondering how I could escape it, and in thinking how happy I should have felt if Viscount Broomville had been my promised husband, instead of the man who had won my consent through no willingness on my part. I could even yet hardly understand how it was that I found myself pledged to marry somebody whom I did not love, and it was with a painful sense of helplessness that I opened the little package that Susan had brought to me so proudly.

It contained a wildly extravagant love-letter, in which I was implored to settle the wedding-day forthwith. The ring which accompanied the letter was a scintillating diamond half-hoop, which I would fain—if I had dared—have thrown away from me, for was it not the outward and visible sign of future bondage?

"I won't wear it." I whispered to myself. "I won't wear it! I was mad to answer the Prince in so halting a fashion, that he mistook my 'No' for 'Yes.' It was wrong, too, for I can never marry him."

"And the master says, please will you come down punctually at half-past nine, miss? He wants to speak to you before His Highness calls, and that will be at ten o'clock."

Ten o'clock! And it was already eight! Was I only to have two more hours of freedom before the bargain was clinched beyond undoing? Or had I still time to escape from the net which seemed about to enmesh me?

"Susan," I said, "are there any letters for me?"

"The postman has not been yet."

"Then run downstairs at once, and be careful to secure every letter intended for me. Mind, it is important. Don't let anybody else touch them."

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Susan, who very likely wondered at receiving such an order, ran off to do my bidding, while I drank the cup of tea she had brought me. Then, both bodily and mental activity suddenly returned to me and I hastily began to dress myself, preparatory to going out.

"I have time to take a hansom and find Miss D'Alton before breakfast, and to see if the antidote will have any effect upon her. If it turns out that her ailment is not amenable to the antidote mentioned in the book of poisons. I shall then be more convinced than ever that my doubts are unfounded.

"Please, miss, I was too late to catch the postman. Mrs. Sherwood had the letters, and she says that there are none for you."

This was the message brought up by Susan, and I felt more disappointed than I could say to hear that Sophie Melrose had not written to me, according to promise. However, there were many things which might have hindered her, and I strove to make the best of my disappointment, the while I hurried softly downstairs, and watched my opportunity to slip out unobserved.

In this I was successful, and, walking up Park Lane, I took a hansom at the Marble Arch, and was soon on my way to the Marlborough Street Police Station. Arrived there, I made inquiry for P.C. 941. He was not on duty, but he had evidently expected me, for he had left a message to the effect that if I would call at his address, I should find my relative all right.

The place was not far from the police station, and I was just about to give the cabman the order to drive thither, when my attention was attracted to two men across the street, both of whom seemed to be considerably interested in watching my own movements.

One of them was unknown to me. But the other was the "Bird of Evil Omen," and I guessed at once that he was biding his time to discover what had become of Miss D'Alton. It had no doubt been easy enough to connect the policeman with the police-station. But, in the density of traffic which prevailed at the time Miss D'Alton was driven away, the fellow must have lost track of the hansom, hence his espionage of the police-station.

Now, the sight of this man had exactly the opposite effect to that produced by Dr. Farnie. The one laid all my doubts to rest. The other revived every one of them in full force, and I knew that his near vicinity prognosticated disaster to somebody.

In this case I believed Miss D'Alton to be the victim aimed at, and, with overpowering force, there came to me the conviction that she must, after all, be a person of some importance. Otherwise, what reason could there be for pursuing her?

"I will get the antidote prepared at the nearest seed shop," was my instant determination. "If I can restore the unfortunate old lady to her normal senses again, she will be able to denounce her enemies and keep out of their clutches."

"Drive to the nearest place at which I can buy some bulbs," was the order I gave, and I soon found myself entering an establishment at which it would be easy to procure what I wanted.

But, oddly enough, I did not appear to be alone in this intention. The "Bird of Evil Omen" had been equally expeditious. So had the other man who seemed to be watching me at Marlborough Street. And, still more curious, their business took them to the same counter to which I was shown!

I tried to appear to take no notice. But I was shaking all over, and even my voice trembled as I asked for some tulip bulbs. There was a basket of these on the counter, side by side with a basket of lily bulbs and another of hyacinths. Without asking the price of any of them, I took three big tulip bulbs and asked the assistant to put them in a paper-bag for me. I intended to visit a chemist next, to have the juice properly expressed, but was wondering all the time what the person at my elbow meant to do with the hyacinth bulbs he was buying.

Could there be any special antidotal virtue in the latter? Or was Kaspar Krause merely planning to keep me in sight, so as to prevent me from carrying out my purpose?

I carefully kept my back turned to the fellow. But I knew he was there, and I was undoubtedly frightened of him. Still, I did not actually see how he dared harm me in broad daylight, and in the presence of other people, and I was just turning to pick up my purchase, after paying for it, when there was a stifled exclamation, a muttered oath, and a short scuffle, followed by the violent expulsion of the "Bird of Evil Omen."

"I beg everybody's pardon, more particularly yours, Miss D'Alton," said the man whom I had already fancied to be watching me, and whose voice I joyfully recognised as that of Lord Broomville, though his outward disguise seemed still perfect. "The fact is," he continued, as he grasped my hands warmly in his, "I knew that fellow meant fresh mischief, and I have kept him under surveillance this last day or two."

"But that does not excuse you from violently ejecting a customer from our shop," interposed the angry manager, whose wrath was, however, appeased on the instant when Lord Broomville presented his card, with the words: "Sir. I will gladly pay any loss you may have suffered. But I thought it time to interfere when I saw your customer slyly changing his packet of bulbs for those bought by this lady."

"Did he do that?" I exclaimed, in greater excitement than ever. "If so, there can no longer be any doubt that it is important to secure some tulip juice at once. Listen, Lord Broomville, I have a strange tale to tell you."

Drawing his lordship out of hearing of everybody else, I began a rapid and succinct recital of my reasons for wanting to experiment upon Miss D'Alton, but without implicating either my father or Mrs. Sherwood, and explained how the "Bird of Evil Omen" seemed to be trying to baffle my attempts.

"He shall baffle you no more," was the assurance given me. "I have been on his track for awhile, and he is just about at the end of his tether."

"And so are you, impostor, and rogue that you are!" interrupted my father's loud, angry voice, and heavy hands were simultaneously laid upon both Lord Broomville and myself. "Constable, do your duty! Arrest the cheat who palms himself off as Lord Broomville. As for you, Vivienne, you will yet live to be thankful that I traced you before your elopement was an accomplished fact. Dr. Farnie, take her home."

And then, though my whole nature tried to resist the baleful influence brought to bear upon me, I had no sooner met the gaze of Dr. Farnie's mystic eyes, than I was powerless to do anything but allow myself to be taken homewards, while my unfortunate champion was forcibly handcuffed and hustled into a four-wheeler.

(Another instalment of this exciting series next week.)

Furthest South.

A wonderful story of the perils, hardships, and privations endured by explorers in the Far South is told by Lieutenant Shackleton, of the "Discovery," in the current number of *PEARSON'S MAGAZINE*. The "Discovery" was fitted out by the Royal Society and the Royal Geographical Society, and dispatched to penetrate as far as possible towards the South Pole. Though the ship itself became frozen in, Captain Scott, the Commander of the Expedition, headed a sledge expedition which actually penetrated to within 463 miles of the Pole, beating all existing records by over 200 miles.

Lieutenant Shackleton made one of the party, and he tells us how they spent Christmas Day on practically the most southerly point of the earth's surface trodden by the foot of man. No one should miss a chance of reading this wonderfully interesting narrative.

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KITTY THE COOK.

And How She Married Her Mistress' Son.

When Harry Calton and his bosom friend, Jack Manners, on the same day, in the same church, married Mabel Lawton and her dearest friend, Fanny Keywood, a contract was made between the two couples. It was this: They bound themselves that if one family had a son and the other had a daughter, that son and daughter, when they arrived at a proper age, should become man and wife.

There was nothing novel or original in such an agreement; if there had been, the parties to the contract would never have made it, for they were neither novel nor original in anything—they were simply maudlin with romance, and this covenant was merely the effect, of which a strict attention to novels, love tales, and plays was the cause. So much by way of prologue.

Now for our story.

Calton and Manners had died full of years and gout and rheumatism, and each had left a large fortune to his wife.

They had each left, as well, a child—Calton a daughter named Kitty, Manners a son named Richard, otherwise Dick. The old men had forgotten, long before their deaths, all about their agreement on their wedding-day; but not so with the mothers. They had been in correspondence for the last five years about nothing else.

The children had now reached their majority, and the mothers were anxious for the consummation of the plan.

"Mother," said Dick, at the breakfast-table, "there is no use in urging that girl Kitty's suit, for I will never marry her."

"How do you know, my son? You have not seen her for twelve years, and you might be delighted with her," returned Mrs. Manners coaxingly.

"I know I shouldn't," Dick said. "She was a red-headed abomination when she was a child, and I'm certain she's the same now."

"Oh, Richard!"

"Even if she was as handsome as Eve, I wouldn't marry her. I'd feel disgusted the moment I met her, and so would she if she had any sense. We'd be introduced, we'd look at each other, and say to ourselves, 'And this is the person I've got to marry!' and then we would hate each other."

"Well, it seems to me, Dick, that you might at least wait until you see each other, before you make up your mind. This is too bad," whined Mrs. Manners, wiping her eyes with a napkin, and not discovering her mistake until she rubbed some mustard into her blue orbs, which occasioned the use of her handkerchief in good earnest—"just when I thought I had such good news for you!"

"What is the news?"

"She's coming here."

"Who? Kitty Calton?"

"Yes. I received a letter this morning from her mother, saying Kitty would start in a day or two."

"Oh, Heavens," groaned Dick. "You must stop her," he said seriously. "If she comes, I go. I know what she'll be; a little stuck-up person, full of the French airs she acquired by studying abroad for twelve years; she'll say, *Mon Dieu*, and *ma foi*, and she'll talk about her *naiveté* and *gaucherie* and her *chic*; she'll speak bad French in the present tense, indicative mood, of the first conjunction, and she'll commence all her questions with *Est-ce-que*, and then stick like the young man at the Veneerings' party. I sha'n't see her, that's settled. Write to her mother and say we are going on a visit, and we don't know when we will return; or, better, go to town, see Mrs. Calton, explain openly that I will never marry a Frenchified wax doll, but that I want a wife who knows how to keep a house in order, can cook, preserve, sweep, bake, darn, sew, mend, dust, and, as the advertisements say, 'make herself generally useful.' In short, a woman like my respected mother; and, so that you may kill two birds with one stone, find a cook who can cook, and fetch her back with you."

An idea seemed to strike Mrs. Manners, and she answered gaily:

"Well, Dick, everything is for the best. If you won't marry her, you won't; so I'll do as you say."

After breakfast she made a hurried toilette, and took the first train for the city.

Towards evening she returned with as pretty a little piece of femininity as Dick had ever seen before. The dainty, curly-haired little woman straight-way went to the kitchen, and then Mrs. Manners informed her son that she had made matters all right with Mrs. Calton, and that the pretty conglomeration of muslin, curls, pink and white, was a new cook she had engaged.

With the advent of the new cook came luxuries such as had never been seen on the Manners' table before. The *cuisine* was perfect. Richard's stockings were mended so neatly that an old pair of socks was better than a new pair. His shirts, too, were washed and ironed so perfectly that their whiteness and gloss caused envy in the bosoms of all his male friends.

But another change had been effected by the cook. The pink and white young lady, whom the hottest fire never made red and white, was accustomed to take a seat in the sitting-room in the evening and attend to her sewing—the kitchen being locked up—to save gas, Mrs. Manners said; and Dick remained at home at nights, something unusual for him.

In fact, Dick was in love with the cook, and he found a hundred excuses a day to go to the kitchen and have a word or two with the curly-headed little woman.

At first she was very cold to him, but gradually, as she saw his respect increase with his love, the ice of her reserve began to melt under the warmth of his passion, and the young man was correspondingly happy.

At length Dick found himself so entangled in the net of love that nothing but marriage would free him; so he entered the kitchen one afternoon, and, with a preamble, proposed marriage.

"Will you marry me?" said he.

"No; I will not," she answered.

"Why?"

"I'm a cook, and you're a gentleman."

"You're a lady as well as a cook, and fit to be a gentleman's wife."

"I daresay I am; but I don't want to be a cook all my life."

"Then marry me."

"And work to support you?

"Why, my dear, I'm rich!"

"You mean your mother is."

"Well, she would deny me nothing."

"I don't know about that. You don't know how she'd act if you married her cook. Besides, I've no fancy for a man

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who can't support himself and his wife without help from his mother. I understand you, Dick, and I admit that I love you."

"My darling!" he cried, embracing her.

"There, now, stop. You wouldn't marry a wax doll of a girl who couldn't keep a house in order, cook, carve, preserve, darn, mend, sew, dust, and sweep. I heard you say so."

"That is true," ruefully remarked Dick.

"Well, I will not marry a man who cannot support me by his own labour. I don't want a club-house swell or a man of Society for a husband; I want a real man, a hard-fisted workman, who can knock down a giant if he harms me; a good honest son of toil, one whom I'll be proud to point out as my husband, and on whose shoulder I can lean my head, and, confident of his strong love, know no fear in the world."

"What do you want me to do, my darling?"

"Learn a trade; be a man—an independent man. When you have earned enough money to buy a set of furniture, and can show me that you are able to support me, I'll say, 'Dick, I'm yours.'"

"I'll do it," cried Dick.

Next day, without a word of opposition from his mother, which he thought rather strange, he left home, went to the City, and made arrangements with a friend of his, a carpenter and builder, to learn a trade.

Dick was a natural mechanic. No workman was ever needed at home; he mended everything. There was no tool he couldn't use, and, therefore, at the end of six months there was not a journeyman in the shop that could compare with him for good work. Then he rented a little shop, and set up for himself.

Strange to say, his first order came from Mrs. Calton to thoroughly repair three of her new houses.

Mrs. Calton recommended him to all her property-owning friends.

At the end of a year he had a really good business.

Then he went home one Saturday night, with a bank-book and a plain gold ring in his pocket. He went in the kitchen; no one was there.

On his way upstairs he met his mother. Embraces followed, and he asked:

"Where's Kate?"

We have hitherto neglected to mention that the cook's name was Kate.

"Not in," answered Mrs. Manners; "but Kitty Calton is upstairs; come and be presented."

"Hang Kitty Calton!" said he.

"There need be no embarrassment, Dick; she's engaged."

"Oh, she is, eh? Well, come along."

"Miss Calton, my son," said Mrs. Manners, presenting him

Dick looked up.

"What!" he yelled, looking at the lady. "Kate, by Jove! what does this mean?"

"I'm Kitty Calton and Kate, the cook, too. I tried you, my dear, and you stood the test nobly. You've proved yourself my ideal of a man. Take me, if you will, my darling."

And he did take her, while the old lady discreetly looked out of the window, and thought of her youth.

"And you were all in the plot against me, eh?" asked he.

"Yes," exclaimed the ladies, half frightened now they were found out,

"Well, I'm glad of it. Kate, you've made a man of me. I insisted on my wife being a worker, and it's a poor rule that won't work both ways."

Three days after, the little village church—but, pshaw! the intelligent reader can guess the rest.

R. Durrant.

The young man was talking to the wealthy widow on the absorbing topic of marrying her daughter. In fact, he had gained the widow's consent to the match, and she was adding a few flourishes to the daughter. "You know," she said, rather diffidently, "that my daughter is not poor." "Oh," he responded, encouragingly, "don't worry about that. I'm poor enough for two."

Your Editor Chats.

Our New Competition.

You will find full particulars of our new competition on page 337. I hope that you all will enter it. There is absolutely no reason why you should not, for everyone has an equal opportunity. The competition will form a profitable and fascinating pastime. Before you start, however, read the conditions carefully. They are quite simple and straightforward. No correspondence in connection with the rules can be entered into, but should any point of importance arise it will be dealt with in *Short Stories*.

A Splendid New Serial.

In a very few weeks' time now there will start in this paper a grand new serial story written by the well-known author, Arnold Bennett. This is a story of very strong force, and its plot and characters are interesting in the extreme. The heroine is a young lady who, the daughter of a multi-millionaire, is accustomed to have her own way in everything, at the same time, however, remaining a most lovable personage. I feel sure that Mr. Arnold Bennett's story will be highly appreciated by all the present readers of the paper, and at the same time will attract a great number of fresh subscribers. Next week I will tell you something more about it.

The Tenth Unsolved Love Problem.

"The Heart of Claire Gilchrist," which will be the tenth in our series of our Unsolved Love Problems, will appear next week. I shall offer a prize of one guinea in connection with it. The problem is a very pretty one and nobody should miss reading it or refrain from attempting to solve it.

As soon as possible I will publish the name of the successful competitor in the Ninth Problem Competition.

A Japanese Cover.

The cover of next week's number will be an exceedingly pretty one. It will illustrate an intensely dramatic Japanese love story, written by a favourite contributor to this paper. Nobody can fail to like either the daintiness of the cover design nor the power of the splendid tale. Look out for it on the bookstalls and in the newsagents' windows

A Prize of a Hansom Cab and a Horse.

The Editor of *The Big Budget* is offering the above novel prize in a competition that has just started in his paper. Procure a copy of this week's *B.B.* and read all about it. It may be worth your while. **Your Editor.**

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THE HOUSE IN THE CORNFIELD.

Telling How the Scheme of Wild Kate Failed.

"Oh, dear!" uttered a sweet, distressed voice, so suddenly and so distinctly that Ray Braddon reined in his horse, with a muttered exclamation of surprise, for he had believed himself to be quite alone on the dusty highway.

What he saw, on turning his head a little to one side, was a demure little creature with big blue eyes, red, ripe, strawberry lips, and rippling, fair hair.

She was half sitting, half reclining on a mossy bank, and it needed but that first startled glance to assure the young man that she was in trouble of some sort. In an instant he had leapt to the ground, rushed to her side, and was asking anxiously:

"What is the matter, miss? Are you hurt?"

Her big, frightened eyes scanned his face earnestly, for a few fateful seconds, as he bent over her, and then she cried, with a half-repressed moan of pain:

"Oh, my ankle! I'm afraid it is broken."

Her head dropped back, her eyes closed, and she looked so white, and lay so motionless, that Ray felt sure she had fainted.

He was mistaken, however. Feeling greatly distressed and perplexed, and not at all equal to the emergency, the young man had scarcely begun to think what available resources were at hand, when the long lashes lifted again, and a second searching glance was flashed into his face.

"You must think me very silly, sir," and a flickering smile parted the tempting lips. "But I'm not used to pain, and am such an arrant coward——"

"Pray don't speak of it," Ray interrupted, more earnestly than he was aware. "But if you will tell me what I can do to save you I shall be much obliged."

"My friends will be dreadfully frightened."

"Shall I find them, and send them to you?"

"And leave me here alone until they can be brought?" she cried, in a dismayed voice. "Oh, no, no!"

Observing his wondering stare, she added:

"I must have lain here an hour already. I slipped down a little way off, but managed to crawl to the roadside. Oh, you don't know how dreadful it is—the loneliness, and the—the—pain, I mean! I was getting more nervous and hysterical every minute."

Covering her face with both hands, she began to sob piteously. The sight of her distress stirred Ray's chivalrous spirit as nothing had stirred it for many a long day.

"Never mind, I won't leave you," he said, reassuringly. "But I suppose something must be done. If you could only ride my horse, now——"

"How good you are!" she exclaimed, lifting a face in which smiles were already chasing away the tears. "Yes, I'm sure I can ride, and then you need not leave me——"

The rose-red flush that crept up to the softly-flowing hair aided the sentence more eloquently than words could have done.

"Are you strong enough?"

"It isn't far, and I would suffer anything rather than remain here."

Ray said no more, but raised her slender figure in his arms as gently as he could, and after several awkward attempts (for even a little woman of eighteen is not a burden to be despised) he managed to lift her into the saddle, where she easily supported herself by clinging to the pommel.

"This is so nice," she said quite gleefully. "I begin to feel like myself again."

"Does your ankle still pain you?"

"A little. But it is easier. I hope it is only sprained, after all."

Ray was gazing straight into her pretty face, and had unclosed his lips to make some reply, when he paused, startled by the ashen pallor that had suddenly overspread her piquant features.

She was looking down the road with a frightened glare in her lovely blue eyes. Turning in that direction to ascertain the cause of her alarm, Ray saw only a very pretty, stylish-looking young lady in a dark-green riding-habit, mounted on a grey mare, who was slowly approaching.

"Do you know that lady?" Ray asked. "Shall I appeal to her for assistance?"

"Oh, no, no! Not for the world."

Her alarm was genuine. Ray saw that very readily, so he only bowed in reply, and stepped a little to one side for the newcomer to pass; though he *did* feel greatly surprised at his companion's reluctance to have anything to do with the lovely stranger.

As the latter drew nearer, she appeared to look sharply at the little tableau in the shadow of the hazel-bushes, and a contemptuous smile curled her lips. It vanished instantly, however, when she had obtained an unobstructed view of Ray's face, and stopping short, she cried out breathlessly:

"Ray Braddon!"

The name seemed to have escaped her lips involuntarily. As soon as it was uttered, a flush of annoyance mounted to her forehead.

"Do you know me?" exclaimed the young man with dilating eyes.

"I—I—have seen your photograph," the lady stammered in reply.

A good deal startled, Ray was about to question her further, when a low moan from his companion called him to her side. She was reeling in the saddle, and could scarcely maintain her position.

"I'm faint!" she gasped. "Support me."

Thus commanded, he could do no less than offer his shoulder for her to lean against, and slip one arm about her waist.

She seemed to recover very rapidly.

They had not occupied this position many consecutive seconds ere, relieving herself, she again assumed an upright posture.

"Thanks!" she murmured. "I'm afraid you find me very troublesome."

"Not in the least," he responded gallantly.

Being once more at liberty to devote some attention to the other young lady, he was about to address her, when he discovered that she had ridden on, and was already some yards distant.

"I'm glad she's gone," said his companion, in a tone of relief.

"How extraordinary that she should have seen my photograph!" exclaimed Ray. "I was never in this part of the country before, and I'm sure her face was strange to me."

"Heaven grant you may never know more of her than at present."

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"What do you mean?" he asked, startled by her earnestness.

"I know that creature by sight." Her voice fell. "They call her Wild Kate here. That is all I am willing to tell you about her."

"Ah-h!" uttered Ray, and involuntarily he sighed, for the young lady's face had greatly pleased and attracted him.

"What was that name by which she called you?"

"Ray Braddon."

"Then my ears did not deceive me. I am very glad to see you," and she held out her hand, smiling sweetly. "I am Blanche Gordon."

The young man was surprised and delighted. He could scarcely believe the evidence of his senses. It was a mission to Blanche Gordon that had taken him into this unknown country—a very odd mission, by-the-way.

A mutual friend—an eccentric old man—had died only the week before, leaving ten thousand pounds in available cash to Blanche, and he, Ray, had undertaken to convey the money to her, and deliver it in person.

It seemed a little singular, to say the least, that he should meet Blanche and form her acquaintance in this romantic manner. But he felt greatly pleased that it had so come about.

"This *is* a surprise!" he ejaculated, raising her hand to his lips.

"I hope we will be all the better friends for the circumstances under which our meeting took place."

"It will not be my fault if we are not," he said, warmly, adding, after a slight pause, "I suppose you received my letter announcing Mr. Graham's death and the bequest he had made in your favour?"

"Oh, yes! Ten thousand pounds was the amount, I believe?"

"Yes. I have the money and shall be happy to resign it to you at the earliest practicable moment."

She turned away her face—perhaps to conceal the strange glitter that came into her velvety eyes.

"You don't mean to tell me that you have the whole amount with you?" she asked, very low.

"Yes."

"It seems a large sum to carry about."

"True. But I took care that no one should learn the fact save the cashier of the bank who paid me the money. I had written to you beforehand to announce my intention, and, as you will remember, cautioned you to say nothing about it."

"Yes."

"It was Mr. Graham's dying request that I should bring you the money."

The lady who approached cried out: "Ray Braddon!"

"You were very good to undertake such a responsibility for a stranger," she murmured, her lips strangely white.

"I'm glad I did undertake it."

The glance that accompanied these words was expressive enough to recall the crimson to Blanche Gordon's lovely cheeks.

"I can see the hand of Providence in all this," she faltered.

"So can I," Ray responded, driven beside himself by her beauty and winning ways. "Mr. Graham was my friend as well as yours, and I know he cherished an ardent hope that we might be mutually attracted when we made each other's acquaintance; and Providence seems to be furthering his wishes."

It was a foolish speech, and Blanche's cheeks flushed redder than ever at all it implied.

"Come," she said rather nervously, "why are we lingering here? You are to take me home, you know."

"Certainly."

He grasped the bridle-rein, which was hanging loose, and they set out at once, traversing the highway a few hundred yards, and then turning abruptly into a rough cart-track nearly overgrown with grass and weeds.

"My home is poor and forlorn," she said, with a smile that seemed constrained. "But I shall soon change it for a better one, now that my ship has come home, you may be sure."

Ray made no reply. Just at that instant he caught a glimpse of the stylish-looking young lady in the green habit halting at a bend in the road and looking back at them very earnestly. There was something in her behaviour that struck the young man as being very peculiar.

Blanche had not seen her, however, and as the overhanging shrubbery shut her from view almost immediately, he did not speak of her.

The way seemed lonelier and wilder as they proceeded. After a lapse of about fifteen minutes, they emerged from an avenue of trees and came suddenly upon a cornfield of about two acres in extent, in the middle of which stood a two-storey, unpainted house, whose broken windows, dismantled shutters, and ruinous chimneys presented anything but an inviting aspect.

"Yonder is my home," said Blanche. "A dreadfully lonely place, isn't it?"

Ray was too polite to utter his real sentiments, so he answered:

"It has not the appearance of being inhabited at all."

"Oh, the best rooms are in the rear of the house, and we occupy those."

At another time our hero might have experienced some

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misgivings. But with this fairy-like vision at his side, and claiming his protection, he could think of little else.

To be sure, it did strike him as singular that Blanche should remain in so secluded a spot, but Mr. Graham had told him nothing about her except that she was poor, and an orphan, so he speedily dismissed the perplexing subject with the mental decision that necessity, and not choice, compelled her to abide there.

As he led the horse up to the house along a very narrow path through the corn, he could not help remarking the deathlike stillness that reigned everywhere.

"The house *is* deserted!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, no. I will soon prove to you the fallacy of such a conclusion."

Very shyly she put out two beautifully-rounded arms, and Ray, yielding again to the subtle spell with which she seemed to have enthralled him, lifted her from the saddle and bore her to the stout oaken door.

Producing a key from the pocket of her dress, she let him into a dark, dismal-looking passage, along which he carried her, kicking open a door at the other end with his boots.

He found himself in a large, square apartment very rudely furnished with a lounge, a table, and a few dilapidated chairs. An unprepossessing man of about fifty sat near one of the high windows, smoking a dirty black pipe. Ray scarcely looked at him until he had carried his burden to the sofa and left her there. Then he turned to him with a muttered apology for his abrupt entrance.

"I hope you will pardon the seeming rudeness——"

"Never mind, youngster," interrupted the man, in a guttural voice. "No harm done. We don't stand on ceremony in these parts."

His manner was meant to be conciliatory, but in spite of this fact Ray took a sudden and strong dislike to him.

"This is my uncle, John Gordon," said Blanche, in her sweetest tones. "He has been like a father to me all my life. I love him dearly."

This last was uttered half in deprecation, as if she were aware of Ray's distrust and found it necessary to give a reason for having a protector so manifestly uncongenial.

"Ah, yes, to be sure."

"Uncle John," she added, in the next breath, "I was unlucky enough to sprain my ankle while rambling in the woods. But I ought not to term it an unlucky incident, after all, for it was the means of making me acquainted with this kind gentleman, who brought me home. I'm sure you will be as much surprised as I was to learn that he is Mr. Braddon."

"Mr. Braddon!" ejaculated John Gordon. "Well, I declare, if this isn't a curious circumstance! I am delighted to see you, sir, de-lighted!"

Out went his horny hand, which Ray was compelled to take, and the grip of those muscular fingers could only be compared with a vice.

"Mr. Braddon has brought the money that eccentric Mr. Graham left me," said Blanche, after a pause.

"All of it?" questioned her uncle, an evil glitter in his wicked black eyes.

"Every penny," answered Ray.

"Hum! Ten thousand pounds is a fortune. Won't you look grand, Blanche, when you have so much money to spend? You'll buy no end of silks and laces and ribbons, I suppose?"

"As if you needed any such furbelows to enhance your beauty!" murmured Ray, close to her sea-shell ear.

She lifted a coquettish glance to his face.

"*Am* I beautiful, Mr. Braddon?"

"Incomparable!"

"I'm afraid you are a sad flatterer. It is wrong to teea a simple girl's vanity." And she shook her head reprovingly. "You should not do it."

"How can I help telling you what must be palpable to every observer?"

"But I'm not accustomed to compliments."

"That is strange."

But we will not transcribe the whispered dialogue that went on. This is a specimen of its tenor, and I spare Ray the mortification of seeing it in black and white.

Nothing was done to relieve the pain one would naturally suppose Blanche must suffer with her sprained ankle. Indeed, she said not another word concerning it, and Ray's head was so completely turned that he forgot all about it before he had been in the room fifteen minutes.

Nearly an hour passed, and presently John Gordon seemed to wax uneasy, for some reason or other. He rose from his chair and began to walk the floor with hurried, impatient strides. At last he paused in front of Ray and said, more roughly than he had yet spoken:

"Where's the loot, young man?"

Ray's eyes dilated a little, seeing which Blanche hastened to explain.

"He means the money so generously bequeathed by Mr Graham. I think he finds some difficulty in believing in its reality before he has seen it."

"I beg your pardon. I was in danger of forgetting my errand entirely."

Rising as he spoke from the seat he occupied at Blanche's side, he stepped to the table, and produced a large roll of bank notes from an inner pocket.

"Here is the money. It is in one thousand pound notes. If you will be good enough to count it——"

At this moment, hearing a rustling movement just behind him, he turned his head a little, and saw Blanche not more than three feet distant, standing as firmly upon her feet as he stood on his.

The human mind is such a mystery! Somehow the recollection of the pretended sprain came back to Ray's just then like a flash, and with a torrent of the wildest suspicions.

"You!" he gasped. "Why, how——"

He got no further in what he was about to say. There came a whizzing sound in the air, and a heavy blow, dealt from behind with a stick wielded by John Gordon's muscular arms, felled him, stunned, to the floor, but not before he had heard voices and a scurrying of footsteps in the passage that led to the outer room.

When Ray's senses returned, he was lying on the couch, and the young woman in the green riding habit sat beside him, bathing his face and temples with water.

"Where am I?" he asked, faintly.

"Hush! I will tell you all you wish to know when you are more fully recovered."

Glancing past her, his attention was arrested by a group at the other end of the room, and he beheld "John Gordon" and "Blanche" sitting on the floor, with their arms secured behind them, looking very fierce and crestfallen, while several men stood near, as if to guard them.

"What does this mean?" he demanded.

He was soon put in the possession of a few startling facts. It was the real Blanche Gordon who sat beside him, and the other was Wild Kate, who, as an unprincipled associate, had laid a deliberate plot to rob and murder him, making the house in the cornfield the scene of the meditated exploit.

It came out afterwards that the mails had been robbed, and Ray's letter to Blanche had never reached her, but had fallen into the hands of Wild Kate, who, of course, at once gathered all the particulars concerning Mr. Graham's bequest, that she was able, with the view of retaining the ten thousand pounds for her own benefit.

When the real Blanche met Ray in the highway, she was not aware of her benefactor's death, but she recognised the young man from a photograph of him which Mr. Graham had sent to her a few months previously.

Wild Kate she knew by sight, and, suspecting foul play when she saw the two take the path leading to the house in the cornfield, she had instantly summoned help and followed them.

Need I add that Ray married Blanche? Scarcely. My story would be incomplete without this ending.

B. Winwood.

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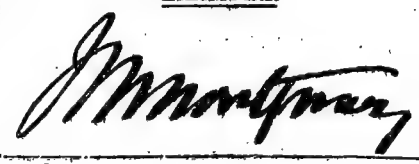
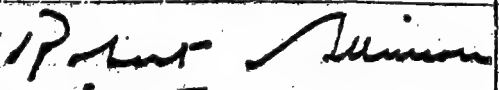
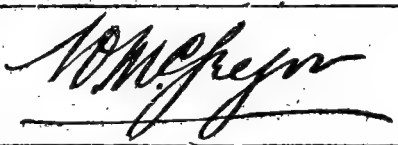
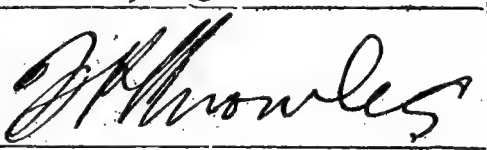
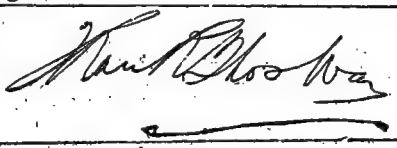
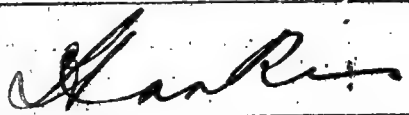
No. 1. EXAMPLE. 	J. N. MONTGOMERY.
No. 2. 	
No. 3. 	
No. 4. 	
No. 5. 	
No. 6. 	

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

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Mysterious Mr. Brown.

Telling How He Made a Noble Resolve.

When he first came to Greenford, no one could understand who or what he was, and, what was worse, no one, in spite of all their endeavours, could find out.

This was sad, because scandal-loving Greenford always held that a mystery meant something suspicious, and when Greenford gossips could not discover what the something suspicious was—at any rate, to their satisfaction—it was worst of all! Mr. Brown simply came there one day, took a small furnished villa from an agent, had his modest luggage sent up from the station, and settled down then and there.

He was an unpretentious little man, about fifty, grey, and scrupulously neat in his attire and person. He paid a month's rent in advance, and ordered dinner at seven o'clock of the housekeeper who had been left in charge of Eglantine Villa. Having taken a walk, he returned, dined, sat and wrote letters, and went to bed respectably early.

It was Mrs. Gittings, the housekeeper, who started the mystery. Though self-styled a housekeeper, she was not above gossiping with servants of lesser rank in domestic servitude, and when asked by the "general," who was in the employ of Mrs. Lancaster, a dozen doors off in the Station Road, for particulars of her new master, she frankly avowed herself puzzled.

This was some days afterwards, and Mrs. Gittings had had opportunity to study Mr. Brown.

"He don't grumble, he don't give no trouble, he don't worry about what I gets him. He's a perfect mystery."

"Is he married?" questioned Mary Jane.

"He ain't got a wife with him," said Mrs. Gittings solemnly, "and when he's at home he writes letters by the score."

"Perhaps he's a hauthor," put in Mary Jane.

"Letters, I said, not books and things. Oh, and I forgot," burst forth Mrs. Gittings. "He asked me yesterday where your people lived, and I happened to be clearing his dinner-table when your Miss Ada went by, and I pointed her out to him, of course asking him to excuse the liberty, and he was smoking in his arm-chair, and he jumped up quite interested like."

"They've got a huncle in foreign parts," said Mary Jane, much impressed. "I wonder if it is him come home? I hear them a-talking about him sometimes, saying how rich he is, and that he ought to give some of it to them, to help them find theirselves husbands, I suppose."

"I've heard of that uncle before to-day, or someone very like him," remarked Mrs. Gittings, rather oracularly, "and it would take a precious sight of ready cash to gild your two eldest, Mary Jane. Now, if it was Miss Amy, now——"

"She's a darling," broke in Mary Jane, "and there ain't a blessed thing as I wouldn't do for her. But the other two—well, there!"

And Mary Jane sniffed contemptuously.

Perhaps it is unnecessary to add that the gist of this conversation was promptly repeated to the Lancaster household by the judicious Mary Jane before very long had elapsed.

"What is he like?" demanded Mrs. Lancaster, who was not above talking gossip with her inferiors.

"I haven't seen him, ma'am, but he saw Miss Ada, Mrs. Gittings told me."

"It can't be my poor husband's brother come home at last, Ada," said Mrs. Lancaster, later on; "he would surely come and see me at once."

"Us, you mean," put in her eldest daughter disagreeably.

"I haven't heard either of him or from him for twenty years," went on Mrs. Lancaster calmly. She was accustomed to her daughter. "I wish I could find out if it is really he."

"Call on Miss Jackson, she knows all the talk of Greenford," said her daughter Annie.

"My dear, the poor man hasn't been here a week yet."

"That doesn't matter, mamma—to Miss Jackson."

"I wonder where he deals?"

"I wonder which church he will go to?" "I wonder——"

"If his ears are burning!" said Amy Lancaster saucily, speaking for the first time. She was the youngest of the three, and the prettiest, with a trim, rounded little figure and a curly head, well balanced on a pretty pair of shoulders.

"Have you done those curtains for Mr. Townsend's bedroom, Amy? If not, go and get them done at once."

Amy pouted, but she obeyed her mother. It may seem a strange thing to say, but Amy's two elder sisters could not forgive her for being pretty! They were tall, angular, and flat—I had almost said scraggy; Amy was plump, soft, dimpled and enticing. She never went out, or but rarely. When asked why Amy had not come to some evening party, concert, or entertainment, Mrs. Lancaster would reply:

"Oh, she is too young! Besides, I could not possibly inflict you with all three girls."

"But Amy plays so charmingly!" one lady ventured to remark.

"I do not care for her to 'show off' in public," replied Mrs. Lancaster coolly.

So it will be seen that poor little Amy was something of a Cinderella in the Lancaster household. But she found comfort and consolation in her piano, and did everything that fell to her lot to do—and that was by no means a little—uncomplainingly and smilingly. She had another kind of comfort—but of this later on.

Mr. Brown had been in Greenford quite a fortnight, running up to town two or three times a week, walking briskly now and then over Greenford Common, living a perfectly peaceful existence.

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But though he did not know it, he was much talked about in Greenford, and, though they did not know it, he was well acquainted with the four members that constituted the Lancaster family. He had met them at intervals, but whether by accident or contrivance, who could say? Even Mrs. Lancaster herself never guessed that the little grey man who rode up to London in the same compartment as herself one morning was the mysterious Mr. Brown.

But one afternoon, visiting at the vicarage, she found that little grey man chatting pleasantly to the vicar's wife:

The introduction nearly took away her breath, and the shock of bitter disappointment she suffered did not help to bring it back again.

This her husband's brother? Good gracious, no! The notion was too ridiculous. However, she swallowed her disappointment, made herself most agreeable, and presently invited Mr. Brown to call upon her, and meet her daughters.

"Who knows," she thought to herself, "he might be a chance for Ada or Annie." She had very adroitly learnt the fact that he was a widower from his own lips.

She little guessed that Mr. Brown was secretly amused at her scheming, saw completely through her, in fact, and that to be invited to call at 70 Station Road was the very thing that he wanted.

"Girls!" cried Mrs. Lancaster, on her return. "Who do you think is coming to call upon us?"

Ada and Annie looked interrogation. Amy went on playing softly on the piano.

"The mysterious Mr. Brown," said Mrs. Lancaster triumphantly.

"Oh, when?" cried Ada and Annie in a breath.

"Why is he mysterious, mother?" said Amy.

"We know so little about him, dear, who he is, and where he came from."

"Well, do we want to know?"

"My dear child, go on making that noise, and don't be so ignorant," said her mother snappishly. And Amy turned round again to the piano, and went on playing, with a tender little smile creeping round her pretty mouth. Two or three days later Mr. Brown availed himself of Mrs. Lancaster's kind invitation and called at No. 70. He was received most cordially by all three—mother, and her eldest daughters. But in spite of cordiality and leading questions, very little personal information could they extract from him beyond that which he chose to give them. How were they to know that he knew what they were aiming at? With extreme tact, Mrs. Lancaster managed to lead the conversation to her dead husband's brother Richard.

But Mr. Brown merely remarked "How strange!" in an uninterested manner.

"Mrs. Lancaster, I am told that you have a daughter who plays very charmingly," he remarked presently. "I am so passionately fond of music. Which of these young ladies is it?"

Ada and Annie could have bitten their lips in vexation; this was what Mrs. Lancaster had wished to avoid if possible.

"Mrs. Preston, the vicar's wife, told me," said Mr. Brown.

"It is my youngest, Amy, Mr. Brown," smiled Mrs. Lancaster. "I don't know where she is."

She had ordered her not to appear lest she should spoil Ada's or Annie's chance, and she had replied promptly that she didn't want to meet the old frump.

"Ada, or Annie, will one of you find her?" said Mrs. Lancaster sweetly.

"Oh, bother!" said Amy when found. But she put a mutinous little curl, that would stray over her forehead, into its proper place, and came downstairs.

"Will you play something for me?" said Mr. Brown, when he had been introduced. "Mrs. Preston tells me you play beautifully."

Amy Lancaster coloured with pleasure. Praise to her was a rare thing, and she was proud of her playing, and knew, too, that she could play well. Mr. Brown listened to her with the close attention of the true lover of music. He crossed the room at the close.

"I have heard that played in many lands," he said, "but never with greater feeling. Young lady, you are an artist. I most sincerely congratulate you. Mrs. Lancaster, will you do me a great favour, and allow your daughters to come and see me sometimes, and give me the opportunity of hearing Miss Amy play? I am a lonely man, a lonely old man—and I hope you will not refuse."

Mrs. Lancaster consented graciously, but she was not feeling very gracious, as Amy well knew. And poor Amy, too, knew of the petty slights she was likely to undergo because of her success.

"I shall be delighted," she murmured, with a blush that made her look prettier than ever. Then Mr. Brown took his departure.

When he had gone, Mrs. Lancaster sat thinking. "Why not Amy?" ran the burden of her thoughts. "If Mr. Brown loved music, why not Amy?" But Ada and Annie were furious, though they only vented their spite by sarcastically

He suddenly came across Amy sitting on a secluded rustic seat with a handsome young man.

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congratulating Amy on her prospects of becoming an old man's darling. You see, neither they nor their mother knew anything about Jack!

* * * * *

Two or three days afterwards, Mr. Brown was taking his customary constitutional over Greenford Common, when he suddenly came upon Amy, sitting on a quiet and secluded rustic seat, with a rather handsome young man, who was not only talking to her very earnestly, but holding her little hand closely in his. Mr. Brown lifted his hat and would have passed on, but Amy impulsively jumped up, and he paused.

"Oh, Mr. Brown!" exclaimed Amy, "please do not tell mother you have seen me! Let me tell you. This is Jack—Mr. Meredith, I mean, and we are secretly engaged, and, oh——"

She covered her pretty face with her two hands to hide her confusion.

"My name is Brown, Mr. Meredith, and I am pleased to meet you. I congratulate you on possessing a most charming little sweetheart, and I hope you'll deserve her."

"I intend to, sir," said Jack in a manly, pleasant voice. "We were just speaking of you and your admiration of my little girl's playing. It is not my fault our engagement is a secret," he went on frankly, "we both thought it wise to wait until I am in a better position before I go to Mrs. Lancaster. She would only refuse to hear me now, and we should be parted. As it is, we can meet like this occasionally—and we can wait."

Amy looked up in her lover's face with tears in her eyes.

"Spoken like a man and a lover," said Mr. Brown. "Tell me—what are you, and where are you?"

Jack Meredith told him.

"Thanks. Now, good-bye. Go on with your courting. It is the Spring of one's life, the love-making time! I was young once, and in love, too, long ago. I'm an old man now! I'll keep your secret, never fear!"

"Don't go!" cried Amy, "please!"

"I said I was an old man," said Mr. Brown with a smile, "but I'm not so old as to forget that two used to be company in my young days, and is so still, I fancy!" and he walked briskly away, laughing.

"Well!" said Amy.

"Well!" replied Jack.

They sat and discussed Mr. Brown for a little while, then the conversation, after the fashion of lovers' talk, drifted back to themselves.

* * * * *

That was Amy's comfort, though the secret engagement now and then marred it. They had met when Amy had been visiting an old school friend in London, and what Jack had told Mr. Brown fairly explains their position. He was poor, too poor to dream of marrying, but if Amy would wait for him, he would work for her. Would Amy wait for him? What a foolish question to ask. Jack managed to steal a few hours now and then to spend with his sweetheart, and the old rustic seat where Mr. Brown had surprised them was their trysting place, where they met and parted, when Jack went back to smoky London, and Amy returned home, happier, yet sometimes to shed a few tears in her own little bedroom.

* * * * *

"What a good thing it would be for Amy—for all of us," thought Mrs. Lancaster. "Mr. Brown must have money, he is a gentleman, and not so very much older than Amy. But I do wish it had been one of the others!" with a sigh.

After this Mr. Brown and the Lancasters met frequently, out of doors, for it was summer-time, and Ada and Amy had been twice or thrice to Eglantine Villa, and Mr. Brown had listened with keen delight to Amy's playing. It occurred to Ada that he watched her, as a cat does a mouse, with bright eyes that let nothing escape their observation.

She told her mother this, and Mrs. Lancaster was delighted. But if she had only known it, Mr. Brown was watching her too! He had now quite established himself in Greenford society, such as it was, and his ears were always wide open at the mention of the Lancasters.

He even saw through Mrs. Lancaster's plan for him to fall in love with Amy, and the thought of this often made him give a quiet chuckle. He remembered Jack.

He noted Ada's veiled bitterness, though she always wore her most pleasant manner for his benefit. He saw through Annie's selfish disposition perfectly; and he formed a pretty correct notion of Amy's life at No. 70, though he never said a word to her when chance happened to afford an opportunity of doing so, and Amy herself never alluded to the snubs and slights that were her daily lot.

Amy came down to breakfast with a very bright face one morning. There was a letter in her bodice, not far away from her beating heart.

"Good news?" asked Annie, sourly noticing her happy face and shining eyes.

"Only a letter from—Nellie Bowman," said Amy, colouring.

"She writes to you very often," said Ada.

"Twice a week. We arranged that when I was in London."

"Oh, Amy, that letter so close to your heart is in a masculine handwriting!"

"You never show us her letters."

"You were not at school with her, so they would not interest you."

"I insist," interrupted Mrs. Lancaster, who had been listening to the conversation, "upon you showing your sister that letter, Amy!"

Amy half rose from her seat, with her hand on her precious possession as if to protect the secret. Mrs. Lancaster little knew what result her insistence would have.

"After breakfast," Amy faltered.

"At once!"

After all, thought Amy, remembering the splendid piece of news concerning Jack and herself, the great and glorious unexpected thing that his dear letter told about, the "scene" would have to come sooner or later. So she slipped it from her dress, and handed it, not without a trembling sensation at her heart, to her mother.

"A love-letter!" almost shrieked that horrified lady, when she had read the first words.

"Yes," said Amy boldly, "from the man I am engaged to and am going to marry."

"Go to your room!" exclaimed Mrs. Lancaster, almost beside herself with anger; "you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Amy walked proudly out of the room, holding her curly head like a princess, and Ada and Annie were left to bear the brunt of their mother's rage and disappointment.

"To think that she should deceive me under my very eyes! I shall consult Mr. Brown!"

Ada laughed bitterly.

"Our refuge in distress!" she said; "he won't sympathise with you, mother!"

Mrs. Lancaster gave a shriek of horror, and sat down suddenly, grasping the letter in her hand.

"What is it now?" asked Annie, who was not sorry to see Amy in disgrace.

Mrs. Lancaster had been perusing the letter.

"He knows him—Mr. Brown! It says so here. It's a plot! Listen." And she proceeded to read from the letter in her hand. "Great news, my darling." Here Mrs. Lancaster shuddered. "I have been offered a berth in the Perpetual Insurance Company's offices, at a salary of £300 a year. I shall come and see your mother at once now, and ask her for you. Do you think Mr. Brown had anything to do with it? You remember that day at our seat he asked me where he could find me. It certainly seems like it."

Mrs. Lancaster could only sit and gasp.

"Three hundred a year is not to be sneered at," said Ada Lancaster.

"But, Mr. Brown," began her mother.

"Pooh!" exclaimed Annie, "she would never have

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married him even if the writer of that letter hadn't been first in the field."

"I would have made her!"

"Nonsense. That sort of thing is only done in books and plays, not in real life," said Ada sagely.

Mrs. Lancaster finished the letter, then sat and thought for a few minutes.

"Go and tell Amy to come down," she said at last. Annie went, but returned quickly with a frightened look on her sallow face.

"She's gone!" she said.

"Gone? Impossible!"

"Her hat is not there."

"But where can she have gone?" the mother demanded.

"To Mr. Brown, of course," said Ada. At that moment a knock at the front door proved the truth of this remark, for Mr. Brown entered the room, holding Amy by the hand.

"I have brought this naughty young lady back to say she is sorry!" he said; he spoke quietly, but there was a kind of twinkle in his eyes.

"I am sorry, mother, but I intend to marry Jack all the same!"

At this defiant speech Mr. Brown's twinkle developed into a smile.

"I see nothing to laugh at!" said Mrs. Lancaster indignantly.

"No, indeed," echoed Annie, and received a sharp glance from her mother.

"I know Mr. Meredith," said Mr. Brown, "and think very highly of him, so highly that I have obtained him a berth in a company with which I am concerned, at a handsome salary—quite enough for him to marry on."

Amy threw a grateful smile at Mr. Brown, and pressed the hand that still held her own.

"I leave this young lady with you, Mrs. Lancaster. If you take my advice, let her marry Mr. Meredith, and say no more about the past."

"It's the only thing to be done, it seems," said Mrs. Lancaster despairingly. All her castles had crumbled to the earth.

"I have only one other thing to say," Mr. Brown continued, "and that is to tell you that your husband's brother, Richard, will call upon you at four o'clock this afternoon."

Mrs. Lancaster gave a startled cry of utter astonishment, and sank into the nearest chair.

"You know him?" she faltered.

"Intimately. He has been my closest friend for eighteen years. Good morning." He put Amy's hand to his lips and was gone.

"Oh!" was all Mrs. Lancaster could say. But it meant volumes. Mr. Brown had been no doubt keeping a watch upon them all, and reporting his opinion to Richard Lancaster. This was in fact just what Mr. Brown had been doing, but Mrs. Lancaster would not have felt very happy or flattered had she known in what terms he had expressed himself.

Mrs. Lancaster struggled to her feet, and tottered from the room.

"I shall go and lie down," she said; "I cannot see this man." She still held Amy's love-letter, and she handed it to her again, much to Amy's joy—"Tell him I consent."

Amy kissed her mother tenderly at this, and would have helped her from the room.

"No," said the mother, "not you. Ada?"

* * * * *

The rest is soon told. Jack Meredith arrived, glowing with the good news, and found Amy waiting to rush into his arms and impart her own good news. What they said what they did—well, is it not written in the chronicles of lovers for time immemorial?

Richard Lancaster that same afternoon had a brief and business-like interview with his dead brother's wife, at which Mr. Brown was present. He had sent, he said, his friend Mr. Brown to Greenford, when, on his arrival in England, he found out where Mrs. Lancaster was living—in order to learn such truths, either pleasant or unpleasant, as it would be improbable, even impossible, he, a rich man, could ever find out for himself and personally. He had received Mr. Brown's reports, and had formed his intentions for the future upon them to a great extent. He quite approved of Amy's suitor. In fact he was a large shareholder in the company. He intended to allow Mrs. Lancaster £500 a year until her death, her two daughters Ada and Annie £1,000 each, as a marriage portion.

Mrs. Lancaster stared at him in stupefaction.

"Then you must be very rich, Dick," she stammered.

"I am. Somewhere about a quarter of a million, I think, isn't it, Brown?"

Mr. Brown nodded. He was quietly enjoying the whole thing.

"Your daughter, Amy, I shall adopt, and as I am never likely to marry again, and am childless, I shall make her my heiress, allowing her £500 a year for her marriage portion."

And then Mrs. Lancaster fully realised how badly she had played the good cards she had held, and how much she had lost.

* * * * *

"You will marry me still, Jack!" said Amy, when she heard the news, and only Mr. Brown was within hearing.

"I ought to say no," said her lover, "but I cannot!"

"And I wouldn't let you if you could!"

They moved away together hand-in-hand.

"How happy they are," mused Mr. Brown, watching them with a strange look in his eyes. "He will make her far happier than I could have done. It is better so. And yet—I should have loved her very dearly!"

Clifton Bingham.

'Take Care of No. 1.'

That is a very old piece of advice, "take care of Number 1," and a very important one.

Moreover, it applies equally well to other things, and in certain cases well repays one to follow it.

There is, for example, No. 1 of **THE RAPID REVIEW,** the New Magazine which has taken the reading public by storm. In a few years the early issues of **THE RAPID REVIEW** will be decidedly valuable, and they will always be very interesting possessions, enabling you to compare them with the current number at some future time, noting the various changes and improvements which have taken place.

So remember, if you have got No. 1, to take good care of it. If you have not got it, try your best to obtain a copy, and finally, to make certain of getting No. 2, which is out on March 12th. Price Sixpence.

THE RAPID REVIEW is the Magazine of the day. It keeps you up-to-date in everything, from the War to the latest Periodicals, from Books and Plays and Music to Woman's Work and Interests. It is full of interesting matter concerning the things you care about, and it will interest you deeply in the things which (up till now) you have not paid particular attention to.

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She Knew.

Young Hobbs: "Mamma, what animal is the king of beasts?" Mrs. Hobbs (with a significant look at her husband): "Man!"

His Discovery.

She (reproachfully): "Before we were married you used to say you couldn't live without me." He: "A man never knows what he can do till he tries."

What She Meant.

"She is a very sweet girl." "Why, the heartless flirt had promised to marry four different men." "Well, that's what I mean; her manners are most engaging."

A Delayed Luxury.

"Here we have only been married two days, Clarence, and you're scolding me already." "I know, my dear; but just think how long I have been waiting for the chance."

Thoughtless—or Cruel?

Miss Oldgirl (who writes): "I am thinking of writing a love story founded on my own experience." Miss Maybudd: "Oh, dear me! Couldn't you bring it to a happier ending?"

He Could.

Practical Father: "If he says he loves you I suppose he does; but can he support you?" Daughter: "Why, papa! You must know that it wasn't his fault that the chair broke."

It Was Admirable.

The Fiancée: "I'm sure that you would be cool in the presence of danger." The Fiancé: "Well, I don't like to boast, but you should have seen the way I kept my nerve when I called on your father."

An Old Adage.

"It can't be possible that Hardup's going to marry Susie Banknote. Money enough, I suppose, but an ugly, shrivelled-up little thing, as thin as a straw." "But have you never heard that drowning men catch at a straw?"

Careful.

Paul (aged ten): "Gladys, do you truly love me?" Gladys (aged nine): "With all my heart." Paul: "Then let us fly together to the end of the world." Gladys: "But, dearest, I haven't learnt my to-morrow's lessons."

His Reward.

"I thought," he said, "that I knew how to make love." "And don't you?" "Why, it didn't seem to work right when I told Rose she was the only girl I had ever loved." "What did she say?" "She said she'd never marry a liar."

A Honeymoon Experience.

The Groom: "Would you mind if I went into a smoking compartment, dear?" The Bride: "What! to smoke?" The Groom: "Oh, dear no. I want to experience the agony of being away from you, so that the joy of my return will be all the more intensified."

A Convincing Argument.

Flipper: "Why does he object to his wife going out alone in her motor?" Flapper: "Because he can't see how one unmanageable thing can manage another."

Temperate.

Guest: "I hear your husband is a spiritualist. Have you ever seen any sign of a spirit?" Domineering Wife: "In my husband? Well, I should hope not!"

What She Feared.

Clare: "He pressed me to tell him if I really and truly loved him." Maude: "And did you tell him?" Clare: "Not I. I was afraid if I did he might stop the pressure."

Well Defined.

"I say, pa," queried little Billy Eagerlearn, "what's an echo?" "An echo, my son," replied the old man, with a sigh long drawn out, "is the only thing that can diddle a woman out of the last word."

His Ardent Desire.

Mrs. Homeleigh: "There is one certain thing about our girls—they are always self-possessed." Papa Homeleigh (grimly): "Yes; they're too self-possessed. I wish they'd get someone else to possess them."

A Bad Outlook.

Daughter (pleading for her lover): "But, father, I am positive that it is not my money he is after. He says he would marry me if I were ever so poor." Stern and Prosaic Father: "Yes, he looks as if he had no better sense."

His Request.

She (bored): "No, Mr. Lytely, I can never love you. I honour and respect you. I am sure you would make some other woman a good husband. I——" He: "Well—er—could you—er—give me a letter of recommendation to my next place?"

A Wilful Misunderstanding.

Young Miss Lookout: "Where are you going, papa?" Rev. Mr. Lookout: "To the Temperance meeting. We intend to inaugurate a movement to save the young men of the country." Young Miss Lookout: "Try to save a really nice one for me, will you, papa, dear?"

He Was Sure of That.

"I don't believe," said Mrs. Sentimental, fishing for a compliment, "that I am as dear to you as I used to be." "Dear to me!" repeated her spouse, "dear to me! Almira, you grow dearer and dearer to me every year of your life!" And, glancing sorrowfully at the bills the postman had just handed him, he hurried away to catch the next train.

Rather Annoying.

Young Lady: "Now, Jane, I repose great confidence in you. If you see young Mr. Brown coming up the garden path about dusk tell him not to enter the porch, but wait for me at the side wicket-gate." Jane: "How awkward, miss!" Young Lady: "And why awkward, Jane?" Jane: "Because that's the very place my young man's in the 'abit of waiting at!"

The Final Twist.

Gussy: "Good gwacious! Cholly, whatevah is the mattah with you?" Cholly (pale but collected): "Not much, old fellah; but I have just left Miss Silverton's. I was about to propose to her when her father entered the room and asked me my business. I fully explained, and he laughed in my face, pulled my nose, made a corkscrew of my hair, slapped me on both cheeks, temporarily made a doormat of me, turned me upside down, almost inside out, called me a 'jumped-up cad,' and then threw me down the stairs and into the street; but, by Jawve! if he had done any more he would have woused the Bwitish lion within me."

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Her Father's Daughter.

An Episode in the Life of Olga Barotski, Russian Subject.

"And so your good father is dead?"

"Yes, sir!—and as among his papers I found the letter—addressed to your Highness—which I have just had the honour to hand to you, I thought it better to——"

"Quite right, Mr. Thorne!—quite right!—I am very glad to see you! Your father, you know, was for many years not merely my secretary but my friend. I mourn his loss—learnt now only from you—more, far more than I can say. For his sake—for your own—I welcome, with all my heart, his son—my godson!"

"Your Highness is very kind," said Maurice Thorne deferentially, but with a manly directness of manner not unpleasing to, or lost upon the distinguished-looking man to whom he was talking.

"Not more so, I am sure, than your father's son deserves. But pardon me a moment while I read this letter once more."

The handwriting was shaky almost to illegibility, indicating that the writer must have handled the pen with distressful difficulty:

"Your Highness,—*I am relying upon the fact of a life spent in your service to win me forgiveness for addressing you from what I know to be my deathbed. When I left you a year ago I was practically a dying man with but one anxiety, one care—the future of my only child—my son Maurice. It is, then, of him that, with your gracious permission, I wish now to speak, seeing that hours only now remain to me.*

For reasons which I cannot state here I am leaving the lad without means of any kind. Profession he has none, for—criminally, as I now see it to have been—I have kept him at Oxford, hoping against hope that I might live till he took his degree. Now all that is at an end, and, unless my one desire is accomplished, he will have, at eighteen, to face the world, not only a pauper, but educationally unfit to battle with it.

For the sake, then, of the father, who, I venture to think, served you long and faithfully, will your Highness befriend the son? Maurice is a good lad, a true and honest lad; and, upon my dying word, has never forgotten that he is godson to a Prince of the House of Romanoff. I think your Highness will find him useful, for he is well read and speaks both Russian and French as perfectly as it is possible for an Englishman to speak them.

One thing more. Years ago your Highness intrusted me with a secret, which I need not say has inviolably remained with me ever since. Five years later I visited St. Petersburg in your Highness' interests, on a mission known only to yourself and to me. While there I became possessed of certain information concerning this secret which I here confess I refrained then from communicating to you, fearing to add to your already heavy burden of sorrow. Now, when I would divulge to you the truth—which is contained in a paper delivered to me by one now dead—I cannot; for on another and subsequent visit to Russia—which your Highness will doubtless remember—this paper, which never left my person, was stolen from me on my way from Moscow to Warsaw.

I have reason to believe that both thief and paper are at this moment in London, and that machinery—of a wild and dangerous socialistic character—will shortly be set in motion to offer you the document—at a price.

And now, solemnly warning your Highness—as one who, when you receive this, will have solved the greatest secret of all—that the welfare and happiness of you and yours depends upon your possession of the paper I speak of; and once more committing my dear son to the consideration which I feel you will not withhold, I bid your Highness a grateful farewell, being now, as I have ever been proud to be, your Highness' humble and obliged friend and servant,

"Gilbert Thorne."

To His Highness The Grand Duke Ivan Nicolavitch.

"Do you know the nature of the contents of this letter?" asked the Grand Duke.

"No—except that I suspect they in some way concern myself."

"You are right," was the reply. "Your father has here asked me to do what I can for your welfare. I am glad to be able to realise his wishes. I am a childless man, and an exile. From henceforth be to me as a son. You are at Oxford?"

"Yes," said Maurice, "at Christchurch."

"Very well, then; you will return there next term, as usual, and for the future regard this house as your home."

For the moment the contrast between the little house on the borders of the New Forest and the palatial building in Park Lane staggered the boy a bit. He had, of course, heard his father many a time talk of the Tsar's brother, who, two-and-twenty years before had been suddenly deprived of all his State offices and of his rights as a Russian subject, and exiled from his country indefinitely; but he had been too young to understand, or to take an intelligent interest in the details, even had they been explained to him. His disposition, however, was eminently adaptable, so that though this was his first visit to the Prince's house, he quickly accustomed himself to the new order of things.

* * * * *

The Grand Duke Ivan Nicolavitch was, in the year 1880, commander of the Imperial Guard and military Governor of the Capital.

A great favourite with the reigning Tsar; he was also, in addition to being enormously wealthy, secretly opposed to aristocratic influence and to the despotic system of government.

The Tsar, however, was not altogether ignorant of his brother's unorthodox opinions, and, desirous of binding him, if possible, more closely to his own order, proposed to him a marriage with a princess of a reigning German family. This

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alliance the Grand Duke, much to the Tsar's astonishment and displeasure, declined, assigning no reason.

Determined to get to the bottom of things, the Emperor set his Chief-of-Police to work, to discover such evidence, if any, of his brother's private mode of life, as should explain the motive of his refusal to accept his august relative's proposal.

The evidence, thanks to the spy system, was not long in being forthcoming.

It had long been remarked that the Prince had been in the habit of making periodical visits to Moscow, and of remaining there, sometimes for a week. It was now discovered that for three years he had been the husband of a lady—one Kaniska Barotski, an opera singer of some reputation in the old Muscovite metropolis—but that the couple were childless.

Relentlessly angry at the news, the Tsar, not only as has been said, deprived his offending brother of all his rights, privileges, and State offices, but, in addition to exiling the Prince, had his unoffending wife seized and deported to Siberia. For the Grand Duke this was the last straw; and once in his adopted home in England he once and for all cast himself adrift from all the traditions of his race, and threw himself into the hands of the moderate socialists of his own nationality, who had their headquarters in London.

Fortunately for himself, and as foreseeing that which should come upon him, his wealth, except, of course, his Russian landed property, had for years been invested in British and American securities, thus enabling him to keep up his position as a great Russian noble.

He was a man of great intellectual gifts, and of a charming personality. Now about fifty years of age, he looked ten years younger, and many were the fair British maidens who would have been delighted to console and comfort the solitary man, and to share with him his London palace and that still finer place in the northern part of the kingdom, Bayard Castle.

Such was the man with whom Maurice Thorne, his late secretary's son and his own godson, was suddenly, by a turn of Fortune's wheel, called to dwell. Most people said it was "extraordinary luck" for the lad; while youngsters of his own age raised their voices in vain wishes that they had "that beggar Thorne's chance."

One person there was to whom this social promotion of Maurice Thorne's did not come as an unmixed blessing.

This was a certain young lady of Maurice's acquaintance with whom, indeed, he had had a tender understanding, ever since the day, two years before, when he had, in veritable knight-errant spirit, rescued the sixteen-year-old damsel from under the hoofs and horns of an infuriated bull in the forest.

With Maurice's departure for London, Enid Eskeet's love-light went nearly out.

Here was Maurice in the very vortex of social delirium and dissipation, with neither time nor, perhaps, inclination to think of the little girl in the old Hampshire town, who had nothing to put in the place of the pleasantly sweet daily association of the past two years. But at least there were his letters—and such letters—full of boyishly enthusiastic love—after all, the purest and the best, in this selfish, hard-living world of ours.

By-and-by she came to regard the position of affairs, as between herself and Maurice, with more equanimity until a certain day, when Maurice had been four years with his adopted father.

All through this time it may be said that the Grand Duke Ivan Nicolavitch was ever restlessly expecting and looking for the event which should place in his hands the mysterious paper.

As yet, however, its present holder had made no sign, although the Prince had spared neither money nor time in seeking to discover the name and whereabouts of that individual.

It was his nephew now who sat upon the Russian throne, so that although his implacable hatred of his late brother survived that brother's death, there was just a chance that he might accept the Imperial invitation to resume his position, social and military, at the Russian Court, should such an invitation, as was not unlikely, be extended to him.

Then occurred that which altogether altered the aspect of everything, alike for the Prince and for Enid Eskeet's young but whole-hearted lover.

* * * * *

For weeks the hoardings about the West End of the Metropolis had blazoned forth, in rainbow-hued fashion, the coming to London from the Continent of a bright particular star in the theatrical firmament.

This was no other than the famous Russian singer and dancer, Olga Barotski.

In St. Petersburg, as indeed, in every city throughout the Russian empire, this lady with the wonderful voice, with the inimitable grace of motion, and the possessor of the finest diamonds in Europe, reigned as queen without the shadow of a rival near her throne.

Previously tempted in vain to visit London, she had at last, by an offer of unexampled magnitude, consented to accept a six weeks' engagement at a big house near Leicester Square.

But it was not alone as singer and dancer that La Belle Olga sought to capture the plaudits of her audiences. She sang and danced in a cage of six full-grown Bengal tigers!

Round the ring, ascending from below, was built up a railing of solid, bright steel bars, within which the growling beasts, and the lovely, supple-limbed performer were electrically thrown into brilliant relief.

The promised show create dquite an anticipatory thrill amongst the lovers of the sensational, although the ever-watchful philanthropist was already stirring to protest.

Maurice happened to be "up" from Oxford on the occasion of La Belle Olga's London *début*, and expressed a strong desire to witness the fair Russian's performance.

Always ready and willing to give pleasure to his adopted son, the Prince, himself having also a curiosity to see this strange product of his native country, proposed to accompany him, a box being secured on the grand tier.

"What a splendid creature!" exclaimed the Prince, "and," after a few seconds' steady regarding of the performer, "how like!—how like!"

"Like, sir! Like whom, or what?"

The other did not reply for the moment, but continued to gaze fixedly at the tall, stately woman in the ring, as she burst forth into a perfect flood of song; one of her hands resting upon the head of the most magnificent tiger of them all.

Then again did the exclamation escape him, his eyes the while fastened, as by invisible fascination, upon the face of the venturous yet apparently fearless singer.

"Kaniska's image!"

Maurice saw, then, that for some reason, his companion was deeply

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moved, so that he refrained from speaking, until it should please the Prince to break his reserve.

Then it was that, her song finished amid a storm of applause, La Belle Olga turned and directed her gaze full at the two men in the box.

The effect upon each was altogether different.

It was now the turn of Maurice to be silent, and to regard with rapt, whole-souled eyes the woman before him.

As for the Prince, rapidly taking a card from his case and scribbling upon it a few words in Russian, he opened the door of the box, called an attendant, and bid him take the pasteboard round to the lady's dressing-room, so soon as she could reach it.

The attendant knew the Prince's identity, and was all respectful eagerness.

"Does your Highness wish for an answer?"

"No! My coat and carriage! Come, Maurice!"

At that moment La Belle Olga slowly left the ring, the quick clang of the steel gate behind her sounding to Maurice like the shutting of the gate of Paradise itself.

"Maurice," said Ivan Nicolavitch, breaking the silence as the carriage drew up at the Park Lane house, "I expect a visitor to-morrow afternoon. What say you to a run down to Southampton. Your Enid will be glad; and—and I wish to be alone."

"Very well, sir!" replied Maurice wonderingly. "If you wish it, of course; but I thought that you and I had arranged to go to Lord's, for the Oxford and Cambridge?"

"Yes, yes—I know! but—well, you can go without me to Lord's. Yes, that will, perhaps, be better, as I may want you before the evening."

* * * * *

In her dressing-room at the theatre sat La Belle Olga—alone, with, between her dainty, jewelled fingers, the card of His Imperial Highness the Grand Duke Ivan Nicolavitch. Her face, with the contracted brow and the compressed lips, was full of anxious thought. There was no hardness in her eyes, as some, envious of her professional and social triumphs, had spitefully maintained; while just now, there was an especial tenderness, a wistful, far-away expression of intense longing about them which contrasted with her somewhat bizarre, if gorgeous and be-jewelled, costume, which was absolutely pathetic.

"And he comes to me first—my father! My father!—of whom I have never even heard till that villain Bouteneff—who stole, among other things, the paper from the old Englishman Thorne, thinking it was of monetary value—told me of his existence. Why did the Governor of the Russian Prison, when in St. Petersburg, four years before then, seek out this man Thorne and give him this paper? I don't know! I don't know! but I *do* know that I outwitted, at the point of the knife, Bouteneff the cunning! and took from him the paper which told me—told me—— But I will wait until I meet my father to-morrow!"

* * * * *

In the library at No. 106 Park Lane, the master of the house sits, watching and listening for something—somebody who shall change for him the whole course of his life

A card is brought to him.

"Olga Barotski."

If he lives to be a hundred, Ivan Nicolavitch will never forget that first hand-clasp—that first kiss from his daughter's lips.

"How like! how like!" he still repeats.

And she!—she nestles up to him with that passionate gratitude for protection—the protection Nature ordained for her.

"Tell me," said her father, "tell me of—of your mother!"

For answer she gave him a paper in an open envelope.

"I will leave you while you read it," she said.

"Nay!" he answered. "I need you! stay by me—Olga—my child!"

But the strong man well-nigh miscalculated his power of self-restraint

The paper was in Russian, and in his wife's handwriting. It ran:

"Beloved,—*They have killed me! But I bore it—for you. But, oh! the knout!* ("And I—I live to read it!") *Ivan! I am leaving you, and my little Olga. The Governor, who knows you, will see that you get this. Oh! my husband! continue to love me in your heart as I die loving you! I cannot write more. Farewell.—Your one love and wife,*

"Kaniska."

"And my brother ruled Russia by the grace of God!"

It was all he said. Then Olga stole gently to his side and in almost whispered words told him how an escaped convict from the mines had, after her mother's death, carried her away, and brought her up to animal training and a professional life generally. Becoming acquainted with her birth and her father's name and rank, he had played a waiting game, until Olga's promptitude had wrested the paper from him, circumvented his plans, and once more consigned him to Siberian capitvity.

It was while she was recounting the adventures of her life, and listening to his story of his own lonely existence, that Maurice, sick of a lonely afternoon, entered the library.

"Maurice," said the Prince, taking Olga by the hand, and presenting her to the young man, "this is my daughter—given to me, as I feel, from the dead!"

She was all graciousness, as befitted the child of kingly race.

"My father," she said, "has told me of you, and of the Enid you love in the town by the sea. I want to see her, for she will be my sister, this beautiful Enid of yours!"

And so it was that he awoke out of his feverish dream. Olga, his adopted father's daughter, was lovely, queenly, good, but—she was not for him. His loyalty to his little English rose returned in full force, and he was only grateful to this beneficent and beautiful being who had so well and truly brought him to his right mind.

* * * * *

Ivan Nicolavitch never returned to Russia; although repeatedly urged to do so by his nephew the Tsar. He lives in contentment with his daughter, who, to the philanthropists' satisfaction, appeared no more in public, after that first night's performance.

Maurice is now secretary in his father's place, and with his pretty little wife makes up the happy quartette which meets once a week at dinner at No. 106 Park Lane.

Maurice—who knows—invariably reminds his wife, after every one of these social meetings, that things are as they are because Olga is as like her mother, as she is "her father's daughter."

T. H. Latham.

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FORTY-FOURTH CHAPTER.

Connecting the Links.

When Philip had reached London after burning the papers that had so filled him with horror and dismay, he went straight to the Foundling Hospital, where he had been brought up from a baby, and saw the superintendent. He was an old man now, with a kindly, time-worn face, and his eyes lit up at the sight of the boy who had blossomed forth into such a promising man, and become a credit to the hospital. Philip had asked him at once to tell him all there was to tell about the occasion when he had entered the home, whether there was anything on him, or sent with him, that would give him some clue to the unknown past. It was more for Marcella's sake than his own that he had begun the quest, for he had determined that, once he could prove himself at least clean from any disgraceful stain, he would take the girl he loved from the atmosphere of the Court, in which her beautiful, pure nature was being crushed by the pernicious influence of Sir Cyprian and his friends.

"All I can tell you, lad," the old superintendent said, "is that you came here with a few rags on, much worn and of no importance. The only thing of any value was a gold locket."

Philip uttered an exclamation. "A locket! Why was it not given to me before—it was mine—my mother's; perhaps it contained her photograph."

The superintendent shook his head. "No, Philip, we opened it and it was empty—the glass on both sides being smashed as though someone had deliberately torn whatever it had contained out of it; but I will see where it is and bring it to you. It must have been forgotten when you left us, but it is safe enough." He brought the locket to Philip—a tiny gold pendant of no value, except that it once was his mother's—that intangible link that connected him with the shades of the past—the past that had held those shadowy shapes of his unknown parents. For Marcella's sake he hoped to know that the mother who had worn it was one worthy that niche he had always reserved in his heart for her. He touched it softly with his fingers, then put it in his pocket. He was disappointed that there was no face upon which to feast his eyes. He turned to go, when the superintendent called him back.

"By-the-way, Philip, a gentleman called on me some weeks ago, and asked me some of those same questions. He happened to be the doctor of the ship where you were born, and he also asked me whether I knew anything of your baby-brother—the twin with yourself, whom some passenger had taken up. I did not know anything of the matter, so he went away very disappointed."

"My brother!" Philip exclaimed. "To think that all these years I have had a brother in the world with myself, perhaps yearning to meet someone belonging to him. Perhaps—God help him!—starving for food, ill and no one to comfort him! Tell me the name of that doctor?" he said quickly. "I will go to him at once."

He left the home with the address of Dr. Slade in his pocket, but when he reached it, he was told that the doctor had left England for an indefinite period. He turned away disappointed—then a sudden thought struck him. He would go to Marcella's aunt, Lady Violet Frayne-Lennox. She would let him talk freely to her. She knew Marcella loved him.

When he arrived he found Lady Violet talking to the financier and millionaire, Caleb J. Johnson.

"I am afraid I am intruding," he said politely. "I came to talk to you, Lady Violet, about Marcella."

Mr. Johnson put his hand on his shoulder. "We were talking about you, Mr. Nullius, some time ago," he said, in a voice that slightly trembled. "I—I am glad you came in, and so is Lady Violet."

Philip gazed from one to the other wonderingly. The storm cloud that had swept over them had left its mark on their faces. The millionaire especially was suppressing some deep emotion. Philip wondered what it was.

"I came," he said slowly, "to beg of you, Lady Violet, to get Marcella away from the Court. My hands are tied; I am powerless to move," he went on passionately, "for until I have some name to offer Marcella how can I ask her

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to be my wife? So I want you, Lady Violet, to take the place of Marcella's mother, and bring her away. She is, as you know, unhappy, and lately she has been frightened several times by a mysterious man with a black beard and blue glasses who lurks about the Court. It's not safe for her to be there alone."

The effect of his words was peculiar. Lady Violet started, and uttered a low cry of pain and horror; while Mr. Johnson said in a loud, excited tone:

"A man with a black beard! Why, there is a man of that description whom the police want in connection with the theft of my 'Mona Lisa'!"

Lady Violet laughed harshly. "Not that, Caleb—don't say—don't say—that." Then she fell insensible between the two men.

Between them Mr. Johnson and Philip Nullius raised the unconscious woman, and laid her gently on the couch.

"Shall I ring?" Philip queried, wondering at the pallor of the financier's face. It was as though some hideous doubt had suddenly clutched him by the heartstrings. Yet how could anything he said have brought that look into the great financier's face?

"No, don't ring," Mr. Johnson said slowly—his eyes glanced at the white face of the beautiful woman whom he had of his own folly dragged into a bigamous marriage—"I think she will come round soon, and servants chatter."

"I am sorry," Philip began, an apologetic note in his voice; "it was my fault for blurting out so suddenly what I should have kept to myself. I forgot for the moment that Lady Violet was so deeply attached to Marcella that the very idea of there being a mysterious stranger frightening her at the Court was enough to terrify her out of her life."

The financier looked at him oddly. "Naturally," he said quickly. "Women are much more easily upset than men; but tell me, Mr. Nullius, have you also seen that man with the black beard? He seems to have taken upon himself the *role* of bogey!

"Yes," Philip answered gravely. "I saw him quite accidentally once, speaking to a man who had done his best to keep me in durance vile for some strange reasons of his own, and again I saw him that same day on the platform at Paddington with——" He stopped suddenly. Good Heavens! What had he been going to say? To tell the man who was the husband of Marcella's aunt! As a lightning flash the memory of that late afternoon came back to him, and he saw that he had completely forgotten the incident of the meeting he had witnessed as the train had borne him slowly out of the station.

The woman speaking to the man with the black beard had been none other than the financier's proud Society bride!

He understood her sudden collapse in the middle of his speech to her husband, but why had she withheld her knowledge so long, unless it was for the sake of her niece?

Philip thought he could understand the reason for silence, if, like himself, the poor woman was the bearer of so sinister a secret that honour forbade speech. He glanced up and caught the financier's eyes fixed upon him with a searching expression in them.

"You saw the man with the black beard with—whom?" Mr. Johnson said slowly. "Why did you pause so suddenly unless you had a reason in doing so?"

Philip flushed hotly. He felt the note of suspicion in the financier's voice, and it hurt him. He had almost thought that Lady Violet's husband had unbent a little from his distant brusqueness of their former meeting. His voice was, however, cool and collected as he replied:

"My reason for pausing, Mr. Johnson, was that I was not quite certain whether the person with the man was a friend or just a casual stranger asking a question. The train had gone before I could watch them any longer."

The financier frowned thoughtfully. Why had his wife—for so he still regarded her—cried out at the mention of that mysterious bearded man? She in her purity and goodness could not have been otherwise than shocked at the thought of Marcella being frightened by a man looked upon as a member of a dangerous gang. Yet he had felt strangely upset at the few words that had dropped from her lips before she fainted. After all, they might have been just the result of an overwrought brain.

He turned to Philip suddenly. "You mentioned something about trying to find your name—er—Mr. Nullius—the name of the parents who left you in infancy. Have you any clue to their identity?"

Philip shook his head regretfully. "I'm sorry to say I have not, sir. The few things I possessed of any value were stolen from me some time ago from the lodgings I had in the country. I felt it sorely, because although they were only one or two odd love letters of my dead mother, I prized them for her sake, but," he added, "I don't despair of finding out one day; the grave even cannot hold a secret when God means it to be revealed. And now I learnt for the first time to-day from the authorities at the Foundling Hospital that I also had a——" he stopped abruptly, and glanced at the couch. Lady Violet, recovered from her faint, was gazing at him with a peculiar intentness in her great mournful eyes, as though she was trying to find out whether he had mentioned the name of the person who was on the platform with the man with the black beard. A swift exchange of glances passed between them, one of supplication on the woman's part and one of reassurance on the man's.

"Caleb, I will go to my room now," Lady Violet said, forcing a smile to her lips. "I am sorry I made such an exhibition of myself, but I have been taxing my strength rather. I will talk to you about Marcella to-morrow, Mr. Nullius; we must get her away from the Court at all costs," and a slight shudder shook her delicate shoulders. "Good-bye for the present."

She put her hand in his, and as Mr. Johnson went to open the door for her, she whispered softly:

"Don't judge too harshly—I am more sinned against than sinning!"

When she was in the privacy of her own room, Lady Violet turned the key in the lock, then went slowly to her dressing glass, where she gazed feverishly at the haggard-eyed, white-faced creature that looked back at her. None of her world—the world that bowed down to the laws of gaiety and wit—would have recognised in the worn, harassed, middle-aged looking woman of that moment the brilliantly gay and beautiful leader of Society.

"He will know soon," she muttered, "and then I shall stand revealed in my real colours. I shall be equal in iniquity with—that other—my evil genius!" She clasped her hands passionately. "Oh, dear Heaven, grant that I may not lose everything! That I may at least cling to some little bit of driftwood in the wreckage of my life—that at some future period, when the approaching downfall has become a thing of the past, I may yet hide myself with one tender memory!"

Like a butterfly broken on the wheel of Fate, she saw herself being cast from all that the heart of woman holds dear, and having kept her eyes so long closed against the inevitable, the sudden startling awakening—when the scales were being forcibly wrenched from her eyes, she was appalled by the vista that lay before her. As she moved away from the glass she still looked pale, but round the full curves of her mouth was a strangely set smile.

"He threatened that when he fell I should come down with him," she muttered. "So, if I let him know that I no longer dread the ordeal, he will take more pains to avert it for his own sake."

In the meantime Philip was still with the financier in the drawing-room. After Lady Violet had left the room a feeling of constraint had fallen between the two men. Philip saw that Mr. Johnson was trying to ask him a question that came with difficulty to his lips, and fearing that it might be one that for Lady Violet's sake he could not answer, Philip was eager to get away. Suddenly the financier spoke, and at the sound of his voice Philip started. It was abrupt and harsh.

"You have no notion as to either of your parents being

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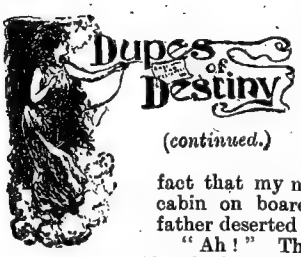

(*continued.*)

alive, I suppose, Mr. Nullius? For Marcella's sake, I think I should like to help you in your quest."

Philip flushed. "Thank you, Mr. Johnson," he said gratefully. "No, I am only possessed of the fact that my mother died in a third class cabin on board a liner. I am afraid my father deserted her," he said bitterly.

"Ah!" The financier winced. "But have you considered what you would do if you discovered your father was not dead and eager to befriend you, Mr. Nullius?" He spoke with feverish haste, and Philip, looking at him, was surprised at his interest. It had almost a personal note in it.

"I am afraid that is far from likely, Mr. Johnson," he said wearily. "So many years have passed since then that the man has probably followed my mother to the grave."

"But, for the sake of argument," continued the financier with a half laugh, "suppose he *were* alive—stranger things have happened, you know—and you found him a man of decent position, able to help you and push you on in the world, and eager to make what atonement he could for the past; would you hold out your hand to him and be known as his son?"

Philip's face grew strangely set and cold. He did not see anything strange in the financier's questions. He thought them prompted by affection for the girl who was his niece by marriage.

"No," he answered curtly. "I would take no money nor patronage from a man who had left my mother to starve for all he cared. I would just satisfy myself that I had the right to an honest name, which I could offer to the woman I love, and then I would forget that the man existed."

The financier turned towards the window and gazed out into the street, and when he spoke again his voice had an odd note in it, as of a man crying out when his fingers are losing their grasp on the last straw that links him with life.

"Are you not hard? There may be extenuating circumstances."

A short laugh burst from the younger man.

"No, Mr. Johnson; no circumstances can be so extenuating that they can forgive a man for sending a woman adrift as my father did my mother. But I must be off now," he said in a different tone; "I have much to do with my time. I hope Lady Violet will be better soon."

Mr. Johnson did not reply, and Philip thought he had not heard him. His face was still turned to the window, and he appeared lost in thought. "Good day, sir," Philip said again.

Without turning round the financier said curtly: "Good day." And feeling himself dismissed, Philip slowly made his way down the long room.

When he reached the door, Mr. Johnson wheeled suddenly round. "Philip!"—and then he pulled himself up with an awkward laugh—"Good-bye, Mr. Nullius—forgive my abstraction. I—I hope you will soon be able to change your name from Nullius, 'the son of no one,' to some other more happy cognomen!"

As the door closed upon the young curate the financier fell with a groan into a chair. His face was ashen, and he looked very old and burdened as with a weight that hung heavy on him.

"Lost!" he muttered hoarsely, "lost to me as though he were dead! But I will make amends—I cannot divulge my secret yet—he would refuse my help, and that must not be. I will make over a deed of gift to him, anonymously, under some other name, and then when the time is more ripe I may win him over to me; once his regard is mine, the rest should be easy. I have never yet tried to win affection in vain—and I must—oh, Heaven!" he burst out passionately, "I must win the love of my son. The want of it has taken the place of all else."

FORTY-FIFTH CHAPTER.
The Breaking of the Storm Cloud.

The following day the financier went into the City to look up his broker. He had neglected his correspondence for a long time, and since he had dismissed his secretary, Edward Day, he had let matters go with a fine indifference. But now he meant to place things on a very different scale. The Ruby Duncoran shares had all been bought up as soon as the public had learnt that the great millionaire had headed the list of directors, and the financier intended to buy other shares in the name of Philip Nullius that would put money at the back of the son who, had he known it, would have repulsed him with scorn and loathing for the sake of the dead mother that stood between them.

Caleb J. Johnson reproached himself for having been too lax in the arrangement of his affairs, and he remembered, with a cynical grin at his own expense, that he had not turned the leaves of a financial paper for quite a long time. In his position of a made man he was invulnerable, and the winds of finance that blew, now hot, now cold, could not stem the course that ran pure gold for him.

When he reached Messrs. Lobb and Rusch, the world-famous brokers, he noticed that mingling with the glances of admiration the clerks usually bestowed upon him there was a new, almost imperceptible, atmosphere of subdued and chastened sorrow.

"Ah, Mr. Johnson!" Lobb, the senior partner, said, greeting him heartily. "I am glad to think that your financial bark is too tough to be turned aside from its course by the first adverse wind that blows."

The financier raised his brows. "What wind is that, Lobb? I must confess that of late weeks I have let you take matters into your hands—I have been too busy to even think of the success of the Ruby Duncoran."

Mr. Lobb looked at him curiously. "Oh, that's going very well," he answered drily. "But do you remember my wiring to you about the South African 'Dancing Girl' mine, just before the slump set in, in fact, when it was threatened? I telephoned to you as well to Park Lane, and to my surprise your secretary, Mr. Day, sent your instructions that I was to stick to them instead of selling out at the price they were then quoted at. I was surprised, I must confess," he went on, "but I was obliged to obey your instructions, and a few days later the mine was flooded, and, of course, you have sustained a monetary loss, Mr. Johnson, that would have taken away the ground from under the feet of any other man than yourself."

"My secretary," Mr. Johnson repeated slowly. "He sent you instructions that you acted upon without further inquiry?"

The broker reddened. "I certainly thought you were there, Mr. Johnson, or, of course, I would have hesitated to act upon any orders but those coming straight from you."

"Oh, yes—yes," the financier interrupted quickly, with a deprecating smile on his large mouth. "I was there all right; Mr. Day acted on my instructions. I was rather hopeful of those shares—even then."

"By-the-way," Mr. Lobb continued, "that Mr. Day has a head on his shoulders, and no mistake! I have just discovered that while he has been your secretary he has been buying and selling shares with remarkable cuteness, but what I can't quite understand," he went on thoughtfully, "is why he should have sold out himself that very day some of the selfsame shares in the 'Dancing Girl' mine, just after I had rung you up on the telephone. It looks to me rather fishy, Mr. Johnson, although if you are satisfied, it's not my place to interfere. But if I were you I would keep my eyes on that secretary. He is a little too smart."

Caleb J. Johnson, the man who had never been "done" in his life, laughed harshly. He remembered the day very well now. It was the one after he had dismissed the secretary from his service, and he had probably returned and, out of revenge, had sent those instructions that had so nearly beggared him—while profiting by the information himself.

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Yes, certainly Mr. Edward Day had a decided talent for winning the odd trick, and it galled the proud man that the person who had scored off him three times running had been a beginner in life's race instead of an old veteran. Yes, Edward Day was very smart, and a smouldering rage rose up in the financier's heart as he realised that the outcast he had befriended was not only a liar and a forger, but that he had made a very decent income in a moment's hazard while trying to beggar the man who had dealt leniently by him in the first place. Then the financier thought of the plans he had made for his own son, Philip Nullius, and he reviled savagely under his breath the cunning of the ex-secretary who had outwitted him.

When he left the brokers he realised that he had gone down a degree in the estimation of his former admirers. But that was not the only blow the financier was to receive. Two days later he dropped another small fortune, and again on inquiry he found that his ex-secretary had been before him, and while doing his best to ruin the man who had let him off easily, had laid the foundation of a fortune for himself. It was a few days after the second blow to his vanity as a company promoter and man of business, that Mr. Johnson met Edward Day coming out of the doors of one of the most important brokers in the City. The older man would have cut him, but with an insolent laugh Edward Day stood in front of him and said:

"Hallo, Johnson, old man! You seem to have had a change of luck since we parted. Don't you think you had better get hold of a smart secretary who can keep you on the lines—you are losing your head, you know—you won't be able to stand many more such losses! And once your credit goes in the City, the end will soon follow, and then think how awful it will be for Lady Violet!"

"Confound you!" burst from the financier savagely. He was thunderstruck by the unutterable insolence of the smiling, youthful face that mocked him by its assumption of pitying superiority. "Get out of my way, you young hound, or I'll kick you out."

The other man laughed. "Oh, come, Johnson—all's fair in love and war, you know," he sneered gaily. "I want to have your congratulations on both events in my life—I have won in warfare in the City, and also in Love in the country."

"What do you mean?" and the quick, suspicious eyes of the financier flashed into the smiling blue ones of the latest man of finance.

"I mean that I am engaged to the most beautiful and the most fair of ladies, Marcella Rust to wit," was the reply that sent the financier staggering against the wall in amazement.

"You infernal young liar!"

Edward Day laughed amusedly.

"I have just come from the Court, and return there again when I have attended to some little business matters connected with some shares in which I am interested," a mocking note in his voice stung the silent financier. He recognised in it the contempt for the man who had let himself be done by an amateur in the money world. "You must be proud, Johnson," the cutting voice went on, "that my very short stay with you has made me into so good a financier. I have profited by your example."

"Profited by your thefts, you mean," burst from the man suddenly. "You are a born thief, Day, as incapable of understanding the claims of gratitude as you are of loving anyone but yourself! And as for your lying boast about Marcella Rust, let me ask first two questions that may concern you."

Edward Day raised his brows superciliously. "What are they? Look sharp, anyway; I have an engagement."

"Has Mr. Philip Nullius been acquainted with the fact of your engagement to Miss Rust?" the financier began slowly; "and also where is the girl with whom you were always about before coming to me as my secretary? Does Marcella know about her? I shall immediately inform her of it and do all I can to stop this rumour."

Edward's fair, effeminate face grew livid, and a patchy, grey-like shadow showed round his mouth.

(Continued overleaf.)

Wesley's Theory of Earthquakes.

"*The cause of earthquakes,*" said John Wesley, "*is sin.*" How he reasoned it out is not easy for the average sinner to see. The idea of such a tremendous physical convulsion as an earthquake resulting from the violation of moral law is nonsense in the eyes of modern science. The reverse is more often true. "The cause of a deal of sin," said Hannah More, "is bile." *That* we can see through. Bile poisons the brain, and the brain is the organ of the mind. It is certain that all the earthquakes that ever shook this wicked world never did half the damage that is done every year by sleepy stomachs and lazy livers. Generals have lost battles, statesmen have been beaten in diplomacy, workmen have been thrown out of jobs, clergymen have preached poor sermons, and husbands and wives have quarrelled for no reason under the sun but a "touch of liver complaint." The crust of society can never lie quiet with such a force as biliousness under it.

Writing of a time five years ago, a lady asserts that she had not strength to work. She suffered acutely with a sharp stabbing pain down the right side and between the shoulder-blades. Her appetite failed, of course, for Nature never calls for food when she is not in a condition to use it. Still, a trifle of sustenance must be taken. The lady took it, digested a bit of it, and suffered great distress from the presence of the rest in the torpid stomach, when indeed, it was not vomited, as was often the case. We need scarcely add that her sleep was disturbed and failed to refresh her. To quote her own words, "I arose in the morning with a splitting headache and a feeling of utter weakness and prostration. My tongue was furred, I was tired, lacked energy, became irritable and bad tempered, and could have quarrelled with my best friend."

Now, what sort of a life is this to lead? What is anybody good for while in such a state as that? What would you wager on your own success in business if you had to pit yourself against other people's sharpness, while you had to fight with a poison-soaked head and a stomach that refused its breakfast? Not a crooked sixpence.

Our correspondent continued: "The doctor told me I was suffering from an enlarged liver, but his medicines gave me no relief, and I began to give up all hope of ever getting better, when I was advised by a friend to try Mother Seigel's Syrup. Before I had finished the first bottle my health improved. As I continued taking the syrup my health was gradually restored, and I have had no recurrence of my complaint since. If ever I feel run down I take a dose or two of the Syrup, and it seems to put new life into me. Signed, Agnes Gatley, 3 Boundary Terrace, Moss Nook, Nr. Cheadle, Ches."

The success of Seigel's Syrup in curing this malady is due to the fact that it goes straight as an arrow to the very root and source of it, the paralysed digestion.

Whatever may be the true theory of Earthquakes, we may be sure of one thing anyway—namely, that bile in the blood, arising from an arrest of the digestive function, is the hot-bed of more sorrow, pain, and death than all the powers at the interior of the earth ever scattered over its surface.

An Old Fallacy.

People sometimes talk of being happy as a king, yet to serve as the target for the revolver practice of every crank who nurses a grievance is not quite the life a wise man would choose. The man who enjoys good health, if not already happy, is certainly on the high road to happiness. Whoever lacks health lacks everything. "Some years ago my life was rendered miserable by indigestion and biliousness," says Mr. Harris, of Market Hotel, Birstall, near Leeds. "I was always low and weak—too ill to work well, not ill enough to lay up. Whatever I ate caused me pain, though my appetite was very small and my food carefully chosen. After other treatment had failed, Mother Seigel's Syrup cured me—made a new man of me. I know of no medicine equal to it."

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"I don't know what you are talking about," he began blusteringly, when a man coming out of a bank close by stopped suddenly and looked at him with a curiously mocking expression in his big, humorous-looking eyes, and the sight of the stranger froze the words on Edward's lips. He turned his back abruptly, and before the financier had any idea that he was going, he had hailed a passing hansom. As he sprang into it, Mr. Johnson, who had not observed the mutual glance of recognition between the two men, drew back sharply into the shadow. A man was standing on the footboard of the hansom that his ex-secretary had entered.

"Why," he murmured, "that's Rayne. I'll bet a thousand pounds to one! What does he want with Day, I wonder? I'm glad he did not see me, but I suppose he has gone after that young blackguard for information. Yet how could he know that I had changed my mind. I sent him the money I 'borrowed' so long ago, and now owe him nothing."

He strolled on, then a flash of light illumined the dark corners of his brain, and he remembered what had so puzzled him. "Why the young cur's forgeries were made payable to a man called Rayne! By Jove! that's it. Rayne has the unscrupulous young thief in his power, and it's a case of the blackmailer blackmailed." He laughed grimly, and one or two acquaintances passing him, thought that they had never seen the face of the well known "gold king" look so savage and haggard. They attributed it to his inexplicable losses in two great deals, and remembered that the name of Caleb J. Johnson did not stand so high in the City as that of younger and more daring men. Like all great "stars" his place in the financial firmament was being usurped by a man whose young brain was showing remarkable gifts of finance worthy of watching.

In the meantime the man on the footboard of the hansom had signed to the driver to stop; then he leant forward to the white, angry-faced man leaning back against the padded leather and laughed softly: "So—wanted to slip off, eh? Afraid to meet the man who, by lifting one finger, could put you in a cell. That's not wise, Mr. Edward—Day! Ah," as the sullen face flushed suddenly, "you did not know that I should find out your real name, did you, although you signed that of the financier, Caleb J. Johnson, on the cheques you gave me! You seem to cultivate as many crimes as you can, Mr. Day. Now, perhaps, since you are making such a pile, you will kindly let me have five thousand."

"Confound you!" Edward muttered, between his teeth; "I shall do nothing of the kind. Get off!"

The other raised his hand. "I shall call the nearest policeman and give you in charge, then. Choose!"

Day bit his lip and gazed at the ever-recurring traffic without speaking. After a pause he said slowly: "Very well, then. I'll give you a cheque of my own this time. Wait a moment. What's that?"

As the man turned his head in the direction Edward had indicated, the latter leant forward, and one swift movement sent the man off his uncertain footing into the road, just as a motor-car was approaching.

Edward flung up the flap of the hansom. "Quick—Paddington—I've a train to catch! Five pounds if you get there in time. Stop for no one!"

FORTY-SIXTH CHAPTER.
The Listening Woman.

"It amounts to this, Rust; we must get the girl away and hide her before any attempt is made to take her from us. Lady Violet and Johnson, to say nothing of that cleric, Nullius, will not be put off much longer, and once Marcella is in their hands, good-bye to her marrying me!"

Sir Cyprian Rust smiled slightly. Edward Day had just arrived from London, and the baronet was not ill-pleased to see him back. He had been strangely unlike himself for some time, and even his devoted servants had wondered at his nervous irritability; the old buoyant expression had left his blue eyes, and the slamming of a door made him jump like a cat

"Is that so?" he said, quietly eyeing the flushed face of the man he had taken into a sort of partnership regarding his enmity towards Philip Nullius, the lover of his daughter, who still lay ill upstairs. "I don't fancy that they will succeed, but we will arrange something by which we may give them a little trouble."

"Take her nurse with you," Edward suggested, "in case they buy her over, and the sooner we go, the sooner we shall succeed in outwitting them. Then I can marry Marcella, while you give her away. Get her down to that place where you say the curate was, and when once Marcella is my wife I can laugh at them all!"

Sir Cyprian smiled amusedly. There was something in the unscrupulous young man before him that reminded him of his own youth. Like he had been, he was a free-lance, an Ishmael with every man's hand against him, and Sir Cyprian had a certain respect for a man who could, through sheer force of will, rise superior to the lot Fate had cast for him; whether the means by which he rose were honest or otherwise, it mattered not to him. And there was the sense of dealing a hard blow to the pride of Lady Violet in forcing Marcella into marrying the man they both hated most, and at the same time cheating Philip Nullius—the man whom he feared and hated above all others—of the girl he loved.

"Are you sure the nurse is reliable?" Edward asked again.

Sir Cyprian laughed. "Very—I hold a certain secret of hers that would make it awkward were she anything else than faithful."

Day raised his brows. The secrets of a nurse did not interest him in the least. He had too many of his own.

"I am making a good position for myself 'on 'Change' now," he said arrogantly, "and can afford to give Marcella a decent home. Remember, Rust, if she is well enough, we must get away to-day."

"All will be arranged," was the quiet reply. "Marcella shall be your wife within twenty-four hours, Day!"

The window was half open, and the blinds were drawn, so neither men saw a white, fair face, with an ugly scar on the delicate temple, pressed against the open venetians, listening to each word that came to her wafted on the mild Spring air. As they talked the woman's face grew hard, and the scarlet line that marked her mouth parted in a slow smile of scornful hate.

"In twenty-four hours Marcella shall be his wife!" she murmured; then raising her eyes she looked at a light that shone from one of the bedrooms. "Dear," and the whisper sounded like a sob on the night air, "I shall save you from that; at least, I can spare you that shame!"

And inside the room the two men discussed their plans, which, unknown to them, had a listener in the woman outside.

Presently she stole away, and, entering the Court, crept to the door that communicated with the forbidden corridor. Under the guise of friendship, which she knew so well how to assume, she had won the confidence of Deacon, who, now that the young mistress was confined to her room, was not so careful as of old with the keys. Lottie found the door locked, but a search under the rug placed her in possession of the key. She entered the wing, and then locked the door on the inside. Feeling her way softly, she came presently to the room where Marcella had twice seen the pitiful woman whose once bright mind was like a glass on a misty day, blurred and indistinct. She entered, and the woman, whose white face was more frail-looking than when Marcella had once seen it, rose timidly at her approach and looked at her with tear-dimmed eyes.

"I have come from her," Lottie said, speaking as one would to a child, "and she says if you do all I tell you, and make no noise, you will get away from here to where people will be good to you."

"The pretty lady says that," and the wan face smiled faintly. "I will do all she says, because I want to get away from here. I want to see the fields again, and show 'Dolly' the flowers," and as she spoke Lottie noticed the large wax doll in her arms.

(Another grand instalment of this serial next week.)

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Conducted by CYNTHIA.

[*In this page are answered any letters from readers dealing with affairs of the heart, tangles in domestic life, or points of etiquette. All communications must be addressed to Miss Cynthia Hamilton, c/o the Editor of* SHORT STORIES.]

A Parent Problem.

"WHAT is to be done?" writes "B. R. T.," "in the following case? I am engaged to a girl, and in a position to marry her. But her people, though they have not been in a position to object to the match, as she is over age, have never invited me to their house, and never expressed a wish to know me. The girl always keeps silent on the matter of her parents. Now, how can I marry her, unless her people alter their attitude towards me?"

* * * * *

They seem to be most curious people. Have they given formal consent to your engagement? If so, surely some kind of understanding has been made as to the date of the ceremony? That being understood, they must be making some arrangements for it to take place. That they have not invited you to the house is mysterious. But that is not altogether unusual in parents. Possibly, it is not you personally they object to, but the idea of the girl getting married at all. I advise you to write formally to the father or mother, telling them that you and the girl wish to fix a date for the wedding. You will then get a reply consenting or otherwise. Upon that reply you must base your conduct. If it is cordial, then I should certainly endeavour to pay them a visit; if otherwise, then evidently they do not wish for any social relations with you. You must put up with that as best you can, contenting yourself with such visits as are necessary just before the wedding.

Six Years and no Proposal.

"I HAVE been keeping company with a young lady for six years," writes "SEYMOUR," "but not being in a position to ask her to marry, I did not propose to her. Some time ago she failed to answer my letters, and I later on discovered that she was walking out with another young man. I am very much in love with her, and although my love has been returned, I am not certain she cares for me now. Perhaps she has grown tired of waiting."

* * * * *

I should think so indeed! Six years, and you have never said a word in the nature of a proposal? Now, if she loved you ever so much, don't you think any girl would expect a man to say something on the delicate subject of marriage before that time? I am not surprised that she is going out with another man. Now, don't suppose that I am harsh on you. No doubt, as you say, you have not been in a position to propose marriage, which shows that you have wished to deal straightforwardly with the girl. But when you ask me to sympathise with you, I fear I cannot. A girl can claim her freedom if a young man, after six years of courtship, says no word about marriage. It would be expecting too much from her to bind her to you, unless you can give some pledge. Write and tell her your exact prospects in the future. If you see a chance of making her a proposal in a year's time, ask her if she will trust you till then.

Young Married Man and Old Friends.

THE position of the young married man is very difficult. "G. P." asks: "Ought I to give up my old friends altogether. For instance, my old football club, which I gave up on marriage, has occasional 'smokers,' to which I am asked. I have declined many of them, but now and again I think I should like to revive some of my old acquaintances. Yet my wife is always terribly upset if I am away from her in the evenings, even for an hour or so. What is the right thing for me to do?"

* * * * *

It is very hard indeed to say, "G. P." You have taken a girl away from her old home, and for your early married life you are her all-in-all. You represent everything to her. If you are away during your leisure hours she feels slighted and lonely. That being the case, to go to such affairs as you mention may seem unkind to her. That is her view of the case, and you have done well to respect it. But my own opinion is that a man should be allowed a certain amount of freedom. Certainly, he should not drop his old friends. A casual visit to such a "smoker" as you mention would do you good. I should quite kindly tell your wife that you wish to go to the affair, and if possible, arrange for a relation of hers to be with her while you are away. Don't leave her alone. In time, you should accustom her to your being out sometimes, and she will not notice it. Don't be away too often, but it is quite right that you should once in a while have a little enjoyment on your own account.

An Extraordinary Young Man.

"JENNY" has a candid lover, whom, I must say, I rather like. The two are devoted to each other, and have no idea whatever of parting. The other day, however, he came in and told "JENNY" that he had a dreadful secret to tell her. When she asked him what it was he said: "For the moment I am madly in love with another girl." It turned out that he had been paying attentions for awhile to somebody else. "JENNY" was amazed at first, but the young man next said, "But it will be all over in a fortnight at the outside. I don't think I am really in love with her, but for the present she is everything to me." "JENNY" asks me what I have to say to such extraordinary conduct.

* * * * *

It is not impossible, "JENNY," for a man's affections to be really given to one girl, and yet for awhile to have a passion for another. As your love seems to be of the sensible kind, it seems most likely that this might occur in your lover's case. As he has been candid enough to tell you the whole affair, don't you think you might trust him? Such an affair as his courtship of the other girl may be nothing more nor less than a huge joke. In the fortnight he may be thoroughly ashamed of himself for having been so foolish, and will come back to you repentant. I wouldn't advise every girl to be so tolerant towards a faithless lover, but in your case, he seems such a frank sort of person, that I really should believe what he says as to its only being a passing fancy, and let matters run their natural course.

Young Men who Stare.

DON'T worry about the young men who stare at you, "R. E. P." You say you are pretty. Well, young men stare at a pretty girl out of mere natural curiosity. It does not mean that they are in love with her, or even wish to make her acquaintance. If one of the staring young men does want to know you, wait until he shows it in a more definite way.

Cynthia.

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may have been born under a lucky star. You may be surrounded by all the omens of a prosperous fate. Should you be well-favoured, happily married or engaged, have troops of friends and plenty of money, you naturally conclude such must be the case. It is indeed a glorious thing to be a favourite of Fortune. But

NEVER

make too sure about it. The fickle goddess plays some strange tricks at times, without the slightest apparent regard to our merits or abilities. She laughs at our elaborate schemes for harnessing her to our own chariot, and, there is not one of us who may not become the victim of her fatal neglect, or the sport of an unlooked-for destiny. To

KNOW

the right thing to do when the tide turns, or the storm breaks, or the ship of life's happiness seems in danger, is the best proof of wisdom in man or woman. But whatever happens, you can neither enjoy good nor conquer evil fortune if you fail to keep your bodily and mental forces up to the mark. Happily

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health is a matter very largely under your own control. A congested liver, a disordered stomach, clogged inactive kidneys, headache, sleeplessness—these are evils you can effectively dispose of by adopting **BEECHAM'S PILLS** as a remedy; and if by the present reminder you are led to try this valuable medicine, you may certainly regard it as a piece of splendid good

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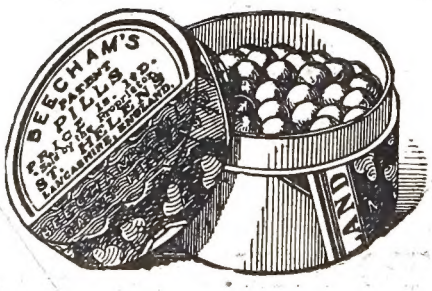

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